The CONFIDENCE MAN

LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

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BY

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CHAPTER I

WADE'S IDEA

With an elegance, a distinction, that made his passage notable among the bustling masses of the Street, the "Great" Corvan turned from Wall Street into another, narrower cañon, and permitted himself to be swallowed by the gaping maw of the Citizens' Trust Building. With a bow to the starter of elevators, and a cheerful smile for the operator, he bestowed himself slimly in a corner of an express to the nineteenth floor, and was swept upward to alight at the twenty-seventh story. There his tall figure, clad in the softest of well-fitting worsteds over the finest of Oriental silks, fitted by its appearance and its bearing the flawless marble of the corridors through which he strode. Fashioned after the haunts of medieval Italian princes, the halls of the Citizens' Trust Building seldom entertained a more appropriate figure than that of the Great Corvan. He was an aristocrat among New York's fraternity of graft.

Having elegantly, but alertly, traveled the distance of half a city block along the echoing marble, the Great Corvan selected a door inscribed with the gilded name of the New Process Asphalt and Fuel Company, and entered it. Within, he bestowed a friendly, princely greeting upon the girl at the telephone desk and coolly

passed her to invade the new and glittering offices beyond. He hardly stayed his steps at the desk outside the imposing private office at the rear to fling a question which was a greeting to the boy who guarded the sanctum.

"Mr. Wade?" he smiled.

"Yair," responded the boy. And the Great Corvan passed in.

Wade looked up with a sardonic geniality, natural to himself, from where he sat behind a cluttered desk, which was not mahogany but looked more expensive.

"Hello, Dan!" he exclaimed heartily. "Come in. Everything's fine. Smoke?"

Corvan declined with a gesture, and bestowed distinction upon the glittering newness of the little office by sinking into an overstuffed leather chair and surveying the assembled furniture with a quiet smile. The smile curled his lips into the suggestion of irony. But when his roving gaze fell upon the cold, hard-bitten face of Wade, his partner, the smile became inscrutable.

"Remember what I said last Saturday?" he asked. "Here's another one; look it over." He took from his pocket a newspaper clipping and handed it to the other.

As Wade, swinging back in his chair, examined the article, Corvan's gaze darted with unaccustomed nervousness about the cluttered desk. It pounced upon a copy of the morning paper and, with a quick glance at the preoccupied Wade, he picked it up to examine it with an inward excitement, which the serenity of his expression did not betray.

Wade tossed the scrap of paper on the table.

"That's nothing new!" he said in his machine-gun voice. "I knew they got Kennedy, and I knew they sent him up. Five years he got, just because the poor fool didn't know when a good thing was sucked dry."

Corvan reappeared from behind the opened newspaper, but his eyes did not leave the sheet.

"Read that," he said quietly; and Wade, following Corvan's slim finger, read:

CONFIDENCE MAN GETS PRISON TERM

Testimony of Post Office Inspectors is Nemesis of Jugglers in Worthless Stock.

SPILLANE GOES TO ATLANTA PEN

After which was described the nefarious manner in which one Spillane had created out of finest bond paper a concern that had manufactured nothing more lucrative than promises; and how the enterprise had come to grief.

"That's George Spillane," said Corvan. He gazed at his partner with peculiar excitement. The confidence man had a premonition of evil; and it showed in his eyes. "I tell you, Wade, our graft is all to the merry as long as we draw trumps. But when you turn up a dead one. . . . They're taking George to Atlanta."

"A piker!" Wade, consciously of coarser fiber than his partner, made up for what he lacked in polish with a peculiar grimness of demeanor; a hardness derived from hard life. "Spillane was a piker. He pulled the same old stuff and got the same old dose." He leaned forward and pressed the weight of his granite personality upon the other. "Pikers, that's what they are," he persisted. "Don't let this run of bad luck the little ones are having get under your skin, Corvan. They can't put their brains against the law, that's why they fall. They pull a boner. They play into the hands of the dics every time. Little fellers! Boneheads! Pikers!"

"And the Stone outfit was pinched last Thursday down in Missouri." Corvan's voice was cool, but he considered the casualty list with an appraising thoughtfulness. "It's not nerves, Wade. But if you play any dangerous game long enough, it gets you. They've never got anything on me yet, and that's why. I stop at the right time. I can't get rid of the feeling, though, that there's something going to happen. I told you last week that I was going to let you wind up this asphalt graft alone, and I meant it. I've got to get away; give up the game . . . for a while, anyway!"

"Forget it!" snapped Wade. "You get the wrong dope on this calamity stuff. You're Corvan, you are, the Great Corvan. Kennedy and Spillane ain't in your class. You got the brains, the front, the nerve, and the talk. You ain't any common 'con' man. You've read books, you got a mind. Barnum was a piker compared with you. You can steal railroads, if you want to;

and play with the United States Treasury just like I'm playin' with this asphalt graft. And you could get away with it, too. Hell, the suckers come around and shake hands with you for the favor of having you take the gilt off them." He paused for an instant, having no more words. "And you talk of quitting the game!"

The Great Corvan locked his hands behind his well-groomed head.

"You say a lot," he pointed out to his companion. "But you don't seem to head in anywhere."

"Head in!" cried the flustered Mr. Wade. "Head in? Can't you get me? Don't you see what I mean?"

"To make a long story short, I don't ."

"I mean this: There isn't any other man has ever been in the game that got away with the graft you have for the last ten years without ever having a private interview with a post-office inspector. You're slick, you're clean as a whistle. You could sell St. Patrick's Cathedral to the Pope, with the reputation you got, an' do it over the dinner table, too. See? There ain't a dic in the United States got anything on you. You can't quit any more than a bear can go naked. It's your birthright."

"That sounds fine, but the fact is my birthright is beginning to pall. I've gone stale, I guess. But what's the answer? I suppose you would like me to stay in New York all summer and cook up a scheme to sell the Capitol to the British Ambassador?"

Wade gazed reflectively at the finger nails of one lean hand.

"No," he said. "When you said you was stale, you said a mouthful. You ain't like the rest of us, Dan. You read too many books and think about people too much. That's bad. All people are either suckers, or bigger fish that live off suckers. You're the biggest of them all. You could swallow up John D. himself, or Billy Sunday. There ain't anybody too big for you." He turned away from his polished finger nails and looked squarely into Corvan's eyes. "Now what you got to do," he said, "is to get away somewhere and forget it. Forget the boobs of every kind and variety. Forget the old con, and the young come-ons. See? Just live for a couple of months as if you was born in one of old P. T.'s minutes. Just like an ordinary hick. Then you come back and we'll get together on the big fall graft with some lays that'll knock their eyes out."

Corvan's expression didn't change. He smiled tolerantly upon his prime minister.

"Back to the farm?"

"Hell, no. Listen." Wade took a ruler from the desk and emphasized his words with rhythmic taps of the wood upon his palm. "When you moved out of here last week, and pulled that one about not being able to stand the old graft any more, before you left, you tipped me off right then to what was the matter. Back to the tall grass for our Daniel, I says, and I sent out one of the best little cappers that ever played the in-and-in to look for a place for you to rusticate in. Ever met 'Snake' Maddox?"

"No. I've heard you brag about him, though."

"Sure. He never turned a trick exceptin' probably a phony crap game before he got back from the war, but I met him then, and he's come along something magnificent. He's quiet—looks like he might be a Sunday School boy—and oh, kid, but has that youngster got the nerve?" Mr. Wade paused dramatically at that, and, after fixing Corvan with a piercing blue eye, answered the question himself. "He has," he pronounced briefly. "And he's got control. The best little lad for bringing in the come-ons I ever developed." The hard voice of the man spoke proudly.

"Well?" smiled Corvan, who was still lenient, still patient.

"Well, I sent this kid out to look for a country home for the Great Corvan. 'A regular country estate is what I want,' I told him, 'where Dan Corvan can go with a high-powered car; and you'll be his man Friday like millionaires have in the books.' Well, he found it."

Corvan seemed to lose his patience at this.

"What the devil are you raving about, Wade?" he cried. "I don't want any country gentleman stuff. I'm not a nervous wreck!"

Wade used his hand with the ruler in it to brush aside the interruption. He seemed to contain an idea of which he was cynically proud.

"Not a nervous wreck," he agreed, "but kind of stale. Well, Snake Maddox has found just the right place. Ever heard of Brookhampton?"

"Sure. A Long Island resort. And if it's there, the deal's off. I can stand the boobery of the big hotel graft,

but this country-home-by-the-sea business exhibits humanity in a phase of stupidity too abysmal for a delicate stomach. All golf and cocktails, show and shoddy."

Wade nodded wisely.

"I said you thought about people too much," he remarked. "Well, Brookhampton isn't the place. The place Maddox has got is a little fishing village over on the Sound shore opposite Brookhampton. It's called East Harbor. Its population is all native, fishermen and such; poor as hell. But there's one place there that's like the old families that built it used to live in all over New England, I guess. It's all proud and simple, with big lawns and old trees, and private drives and like that. We can rent it for the summer, and you can move in there and live like the lord of the manor. See?"

"But I don't want to be lord of a manor. Haven't I got manners enough?"

"You don't get me, Dan. You go down there, see? You've got lots of money, I guess, and when this asphalt graft folds its tents next week, which it will have to do because the post-office dics are getting real inquisitive, your share of the pickings will be anyway fifty thousand. So you go down there, and you'll have a big car and horses, and servants; and Snake Maddox will be your valley and confidential man, see? In that way you'll get all sorts of time to relax and forget this campful of boobs called New York; and you can work out a set of tricks for the fall trade that'll set a record."

He was obviously trying to carry his partner with the sweep of his enthusiasm, but while Wade spoke the

lenient smile of the Great Corvan had faded. In place of it had appeared an expression of unmistakable disapproval. Yet his voice remained smooth as oil.

"And you say Maddox has already got this place?" he asked.

"Got it? Sure he's got it. Rented it for the summer. And a house-keeper, and a gardner. All you got to do is ship down an outfit of nifty duds, get the finest car in the market, and motor down to the old family mansion. See?"

"I see that you're hopping off on the wrong foot, Wade; and right into the fire, at that. You might have consulted me before going to all this expense."

Wade looked quickly into the eyes of his partner and saw there condemnation. His hard countenance tightened; grew harder. Wade did not like opposition.

"You don't like it?" he asked.

"I don't," snapped Corvan. "You're all wrong, Wade. For the mood I'm in at present, a week among the rubes would drive me mad." He arose and walked nervously to the window. "There they are," he indicated the scurrying crowds which moved like massed insects on the streets below. "Thousands of them; millions. All out for the graft. All scrambling to feed their bellies at the trough. I tell you Wade, I envy the fellows who got into the war. It's clean adventure I'm hungering for! A chance to meet a man on some other footing than this interminable scramble for pennies. I'd rather fight it out with axes."

Wade resorted to persuasion.

"Aw, forget it, Dan. That's only a passing mood. Listen, I've gone to a lot of trouble to get this place, and spent money besides."

"More fool, you!"

"But it's the best plant in the world for us. Listen. When we open up the big graft in the fall, you can see how nice it will be when I can refer to 'my rich friend, a gentleman of an old Long Island family who lives in seclusion on the old estate,' see?"

He grinned persuasively. But Corvan did not respond.

"In brief, you plan a little game in which I play second fiddle. My only interest in the graft is with the head work which you seem to think you'll take over yourself. It would be a fine cure for a man who craves excitement to dig himself into a hole in the ground while somebody else plans the lay out, wouldn't it?"

He picked up his hat and gloves from the glistening desk.

"Better sub-let your little deal in country estates, and think up a better one," he snapped. With that he turned to the door.

Wade, for all his domineering hardiness, could not contend with Corvan, and he knew it. So he turned to sentiment; and he did it with inconceivable grace. His appeal gained by the very hardness of his character. He spoke sincerely.

"Dan," he said, "you and me won't quarrel over this. I did it for the best, and you'll see that when you think it over. Do that little thing; and remember the old homestead is waiting for you whenever you want it."

Corvan grinned with his hand on the door knob.

"Sure." He spoke with a suspicion of acid in his voice. "Sure, you did it for the best, and when it comes to a good graft, I'm right with you. But in my present mood the tall grasses are not for me. Better sublet your plant, and get a pair of goggles. I'm going to raise dust."

"Where'll you be to-night?"

"Out at Welsh's. Why?"

"Just so's I can get you if I need to."

"Forget it. I'll be in in the morning."

And again the elegant Corvan trod the marble corridors of the Citizen's Trust until the ornate portals of that building disgorged him among hurrying crowds that filled him with disgust and deep contempt.

CHAPTER II

CORVAN BOWS TO FATE

The establishment of Mr. Harmon Welsh occupied a highly decorative stucco house in a northern suburb of the city. It was off one of those roads that skirt the Sound and are occupied by residences that rub shoulders with road houses of gay repute. Mr. Welsh's residence had not long been established in these grounds which fell away in smooth lawns to the Sound, and the gentlemen who came to spend the evening in his ornate rooms didn't know him much better than they knew each other. But an evening at Harmon Welsh's rapidly became synonymous with the promise of convivial and sportsmanlike recreation; and the small matter that they who came seldom went away without leaving currency, checks or negotiable instruments behind them was for the most part written off the accounts of those visitors as losses which contributed in some vague way to the dignity and honor of what was known to them as a good sport. Under this amiable arrangement it occurred to nobody that Mr. Harmon Welsh might be called a professional gambler, and, as a matter of fact, few of his guests knew that he was. Corvan was one of the few.

Corvan had known Welsh ever since a day when the elegant and witty confidence man had used the gambler

as a convenient tool. That association had profited Welsh to the extent of setting him up in his calling, and he had not forgotten it. In Welsh's house Corvan might be sure of fair play. And while the play was fair, Corvan delighted in a game for high stakes.

This evening the stakes promised to rise unusually high, for at Corvan's left sat Charlie Broderick, scion of millions, whose family ran the suburb of Port Urban across the Sound and who was a sportsman among sports. The presence of the far famed Charlie Broderick made known that Welsh's card room was no place for a piker this evening, and as the assembled players sat waiting for their host to deal, the array of wealth in the center of the table proved it.

In the black and white formality of dinner clothes, Corvan appeared among these sporting men as more princely than ever. He sat straight in his chair, and as Welsh dealt the cards, he lazily watched the movements of the gambler's fingers; and as Corvan watched the movement of his fingers, Welsh, inspired by the generous impulses of friendship and by the size of the pot, dealt Corvan a carefully chosen but crooked hand.

Corvan did not betray the dismay and surprise which Welsh's action caused him, yet he saw the play of those twinkling fingers as distinctly as though they had moved for him with the analytical slowness of the accelerated cinema. He knew that the cards which lay face down on the table before him were a winning hand, and he knew that that winning hand was crooked.

Wade had said that in all Corvan's career he had never

fallen foul of the law. This was due not merely to the fact that the Great Corvan in those days of his ascendency seldom transgressed the law, and never transgressed it to an extent which would not have made it difficult for the most astute lawyer to prove anything against him; but it was due, too, to a peculiar streak in the man which abhorred an unfair play. In his nefarious activities, which often involved many thousands of dollars, he victimized those souls whom avarice permitted him to persuade that they might profit by apparent advantages to be gained over himself or others. Corvan had never played a crooked hand in his life.

So Corvan glanced at this well-dealt hand, found his suspicion justified, eyed keenly the faces of the six sportsmen who surrounded him, and made instantly a decision which was to bring tragedy and confusion on its heels.

Meeting Welsh's eye for the fraction of a second, he slapped down his hand and passed it. Immediately a voice snarled into his ear and a plump hand crossed his left elbow to clutch at the cards he had rejected.

Charlie Broderick, a sportsman among sportsmen, had also detected something peculiar in the manner of Welsh's deal. His suspicion had not been abated by Corvan's almost imperceptible pause before passing up his hand, and it had been confirmed by the understanding look which had flashed between Corvan and the gambler. So he stretched forth his arm to call a show-down.

"By God!" he snarled, "that's a crooked hand, Welsh!"

Corvan snatched for the cards, but Charlie had been

quicker. He swept them up from the table and rose to his feet, gloating loudly.

"You don't throw down a hand like that every day!" he cried.

But what that hand was, the other five sportsmen were never to know, for if Charlie was quick, Welsh was quick as well. In the immediate disturbance which followed Charlie's grab, he pounced upon the squealer and, even as Broderick spoke, snatched the cards from his hand and flung them to the floor where they were lost among the rest of the pack which the gambler had cunningly thrown down as he arose.

Broderick, incensed, hurled himself upon Welsh, and Corvan, who had sought to drag Welsh back, received the brunt of the attack. The other five sportsmen, seeing that the moment feared most by all who endeavor to cover sportsmanship with a cloak of respectability was now upon them, threw themselves into the conflict with the panic-stricken intention of preserving peace and reputation.

Corvan very coolly hurled his opponent from him and, finding himself then in the grasp of two bulky sportsmen, struggled to free himself. While he struggled he saw Broderick close with Welsh, and saw the table go over before their conflict.

"Let go! You fools!" he cried. "Get them apart!"

For he knew that Welsh and Broderick were fighting with the black hatred which only good sportsmen know.

"Let go!" he roared. But the devotees of chance seemed to have decided that Corvan was the strategic

center of this combat, and, reënforced, held on. Corvan exerted himself heroically, and he was in good condition. When he saw Broderick reaching for his hip pocket and Welsh close in to block that fatal move, he made an Herculean effort and tore himself free. As he did so, he saw the door of the room swing open and Welsh's butler enter with a colored waiter in attendance. These men, he knew, were professional bouncers, and Corvan saw imminent humiliation for all concerned. With a glimpse of Broderick striving to reach that hip pocket, and another of the advancing attendants, he leaped for the wall and switched off the lights. In the darkness he heard the mad scramble for the door. Above the sound of that scramble he heard the detonation of a pistol shot, deafening in the smallness of the room. Instantly a flash and a bang roared an answer to it. There was a sound of snuffling and a deep-drawn breath. Corvan felt a body groping for the light switch, and in another instant the room was filled with light again.

From his position near the door Corvan saw the entire room as a spectator sees the stage of a drama. Welsh stood at the switch, and crouching against the opposite wall was the frightened waiter, and beside him Noylan the butler, gun in hand. Almost in the center of the room amid a pile of cards and chips lay the heavily breathing body of Broderick with a hand clutching at his middle.

"Get out, Sam!" barked Welsh; and giving the wounded man a wide berth, the colored waiter left the room as though going to execution. Welsh turned

upon Corvan the ferocious gaze of a wild beast at bay.

"That was a sweet play you made!" he snarled. "That was a hell of play!" He embellished his remarks with the unprintable.

"I always pass a bad hand," said Corvan coldly. He advanced to the wounded man and, kneeling, felt his pulse. "He's breathing," he said.

But Welsh's green eyes devoured him maliciously.

"You quit on me!" he growled. "You let me down."

Corvan rose to his feet and fixed the man with an uncompromising gaze.

"Take another line," he snapped. "It was your deal."

Welsh grinned with the mirth of a frenzied hound.

"All right," his voice hardly contained his fury. "I'll take another line." He approached Corvan until his face was inches from the countenance of the confidence man. When he spoke he injected an extraordinary effect of savage sarcasm into his voice. "THANKS!" he said. "See?"

"What for?" asked Corvan coolly.

The other's snarling grin, so close to Corvan's face, had something absurdly fantastic in it.

"For shooting when you did. You saved my life."

Corvan, completely understanding Welsh's meaning, regarded him with unimpassioned eyes.

"That's a lie, Welsh," he said. "You know damned well it's a lie. I had no gun."

But Welsh did not relax his savage grin.

"All right," he said. "You know you didn't shoot him, and I say you did. Anyway, six men saw you douse

the lights, Corvan, and when they went up again Broderick was like this. How will that sound to a jury?"

"Rotten," admitted Corvan, not dropping his gaze.

"And you needn't think it won't come to that. That's Charlie Broderick layin' there on the floor, and his old man'll tear the guts out of the earth to get the man who did it. You got me into this, Corvan!" The man's voice vibrated with self-pity, panic, and fury. "And I may go to the chair for it. But if I do, we'll go together!"

Corvan summed up the situation without confusion.

"Don't lose your nerve, Welsh," he advised coolly. "Do what I say, and we'll come clean yet."

He turned to the wounded man again.

"Get a doctor," he ordered. "I'll get in touch with Grimshaw, and we'll run Broderick over to Port Urban by water. Don't be afraid about the doctor. You'll have to disappear to-night anyway, and the pill roller won't know who his patient is."

Welsh turned to the butler.

"Hear that?" he barked. "Get a doctor, Noylan, and quick!" The man fairly ran from the room. "Whose Grimshaw?" demanded Welsh suspiciously.

"Runs rum in a rotten motor boat and does dirty work for Wade. Be ready to leave in fifteen minutes."

. . . . . .

Five minutes later a speeding car wheeled to the edge of a dilapidated wharf and the single passenger leaped out to pound on the door of the shack that stood on the wharf end. The door of the shack was opened and the

frowsy head of a man as dilapidated as the rotten old wharf peered out .

"It's Corvan!" snapped the motorist. "Get out that old tub of yours, Grimshaw, and get the motor going. I've got a job for you to-night."

The wasted, ruinous face of the wharf rat took upon itself a cunning leer.

"What kind of a job?" he mumbled.

"Got to get a man home. Over to Port Urban. He's sick."

"How sick?"

"That's my business. How much?"

"How is he sick?" persisted the besotted Grimshaw obstinately.

Corvan thought quickly. The man must inevitably discover that his passenger was wounded. There must be no misunderstanding.

"Shot in a brawl. How much?"

There was something of the animal in the greed and cunning which entered Grimshaw's countenance.

"A thousand dollars," he said.

"Five hundred," snapped Corvan, "and make it fast. We've no time to lose."

"Time costs money," sneered the old ruin. "A thousand dollars."

"Five hundred and fast, or you'll never run another load of booze! And its all up with the rotten traffic you've done for Wade and the rest." Grimshaw unconciously imitated many others of his kind in that he cringed before this man. "If I had my way you'd have

gone up the river a year ago for your work with those kids in Brooklyn." He referred to a not-uncommon practice in a glorious city, whereby the lads are procured by such flotsam as Grimshaw for the uses of what gentry can capitalize their exploitation in crime. "Now get that engine going, and you'll make the easiest five hundred you've ever seen."

Grimshaw's bloated face writhed in a contortion of rage and baffled avarice.

"All right, Mr. Corvan, all right," he whined. "Ain't I doin' what you say?" And Corvan, after seeing Grimshaw actively engaged with the ramshackle craft beside the wharf, turned back to his car with a sense of infinite distaste. He regretted profoundly the indiscretion which had forced him to have traffic with such a character as Grimshaw. In all his dealings he instinctively avoided touching the scum of that underworld, upon the upper crust of which he moved. Aside from an innate disgust, he foresaw darkly that such an association might easily involve him in repeated calls from the depths that could include all the grime of blackmail, extortion, and intolerable claims of comradeship. Yet he reflected it was a fortunate thing that this henchman of the less fastidious Wade should have been so close at hand in the tight fix to which the night had brought him.

. . . . . .

Twenty minutes later he was again at the wharf with Welsh, and the bouncing butler, Jim Noylan. Between them they bore the limp form of Broderick who looked with glazed eyes upon a fantastic and unfamiliar world,

and breathed with a noise that was not pleasant to hear. Grimshaw awaited them with a lantern, and Noylan joined him on the deck of his boat; Corvan and Welsh lowered the wounded man into their arms. Corvan was visited with a sense of nightmare as he saw the bloated face of the wharf rat gleam green in the lantern light, and caught that light reflected from the glazed eyes of Broderick. It was a foul ending to an unfortunate night, he reflected, and felt disgust well up in his throat like a substance.

"You land at Macy's dock," advised Welsh coldly, "and there'll be a car waiting for you. Just put Broderick in the car, and the man who's driving it will make the delivery." This last he said with an evil grin. Noylan, who was to accompany Grimshaw, acknowledged these instructions with a nod, and then took the package which Corvan handed to him.

"You give that to Grimshaw when it's landed," Corvan said; then drove back to the gambling den with Welsh, who sat silent at the wheel in resentful contemplation of the ruin which he felt that Corvan had brought upon him.

. . . . . .

In the morning Corvan called Wade on the 'phone. He explained the situation hurriedly.

"So I'll have to lay low for a while. I'll use your country refuge after all. You say it is East Harbor, Long Island? All right. I'm motoring down to-day. But just for a month. One month's holiday, Wade. . . And, by the way, thanks for your foresight. Good-by." He hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER III

THE SNAKE EXPLAINS

In the cool living room of a spacious old country mansion a young man sat reading a detective story. Snake Maddox liked detective stories; they were so exciting. The inevitable arrest of the villian was invariably thrilling to this promising young crook. Maddox was a slight young man, dressed modestly in the neat clothing of the upper clerical class. A comfortably situated young accountant, one would guess from his clothing, and, from his well-formed face, one would have added the guess that he was probably a member of the Y. M. C. A. It was a grave face.

This particular morning, Snake Maddox appeared to be preoccupied. He read his story nervously, and constantly looked up from the classic mahogany sofa in which he was seated to consult the grandfather's clock beside the expansive fireplace. Snake Maddox was expecting the arrival of the Great Corvan at the Humphrey Place, and he was hoping that Corvan would arrive before luncheon. Snake Maddox had few aversions, but he despised a squealer, loathed country places, and hated waiting for his meals. He could with reluctance reconcile himself to one of these antipathies, but, as the clock tolled its way through the morning, it appeared as though

he were to be called upon this day to endure two. So Snake Maddox was nervous at his reading.

But luck was with him. Even as the clock chimed the approach of a midday meal, which Mrs. Bland always had ready on the minute, the whine of oversized tires on the gravel outside announced the arrival of the long, blue motor car, which bore the Great Corvan to his manorial estate. Snake Maddox slapped his book down upon the gate-legged table, and slid through the broad archway that connected the living room with the lofty hall, just as Mrs. Bland opened the door and admitted Corvan to the house.

Corvan won Mrs. Bland at once with his princely bearing and kindly manner. She gathered that he felt a real pleasure in making her acquaintance. A true gentleman, she decided.

"And this is Maddox?" asked the Great Corvan. It was an introduction.

"Sure, Maddox," murmured the Snake. He felt a certain restraint in the presence of the housekeeper. "You can leave Mr. Corvan to me, ma'am," he informed her stiffly. And she was anxious enough to return to her kitchen to act upon his suggestion without questioning the restraint. Both the men were relieved by her exit.

Maddox took Corvan's light overcoat as he doffed it, and placed it with Corvan's hat upon the rack.

"So you're Snake Maddox?" smiled the confidence man.

"The same," said Maddox, who was himself again. "Lemme give you a card." He slipped a pasteboard into Corvan's hand.

DANIEL G. CORVAN

read the confidence man. "But this is my own card."

"Perhaps you'd like the case?" offered Maddox, and produced Corvan's cardcase, too.

Corvan appraised the youngster with a narrow gaze.

"Thank you," he said dryly, as he returned the cardcase to its pocket. "You couldn't provide me with my wallet, by any chance?" He patted his coat pockets. "And my cigarette case?"

"Sure," grinned Maddox. "Any little thing." He produced the desired articles, added a cigarette holder and a silver pencil for good measure, and, with the greatest good humor, followed his chieftain into the living room. Corvan turned before the fireplace, and with his lenient smile fixed a pair of uncompromising gray eyes upon the youth.

"Your style, Maddox, is admirable," he said. "I suppose you can stack the pasteboards and throw a mean pair of dice into the bargain?"

Maddox took a pair of dice out of his waistcoat pocket and sidled up to the gate-legged table.

"A cold seven," he remarked flippantly, and, rattling, threw the dice upon the polished surface. They turned up one and six. "If you got designs on the natives," he pointed out, "come to poppa."

But Corvan's cold eyes had not moved from the young man's countenance; his smile had not relaxed.

"And why are you known as 'Snake'?" he asked.

"Slippery," admitted Maddox. "That's me. Always wriggle out of trouble like a dead oyster off a greasy fork. Watch me work." He had picked up the dice from the table, and with twinkling fingers slipped them into a tiny pigskin case. "Now you see it, now you don't," he announced gravely, and the little case disappeared from his hand with the illusion of smoke dissipated by a wind. "You get them from under the carpet," he explained, and, bending over to lift the corner of the rug, he kicked the little leather case from underneath it. All this Corvan watched with unabating smile and uncompromising eyes.

"Slick," he said. "For a man with such talents as yours, this holiday of ours should prove a complete retirement."

Snake Maddox winked.

"Watch me," he predicted. "Just watch me. You could work the old shell game here, and sell gold bricks on the side. For a man like me, there's such easy pickin's among these natives that it'll be a shame to take 'em."

"Oh?" volunteered Corvan.

"Sure. There's a pool room in the village where they're just waitin' for me. Just itchin' to see my layout. Do I perform for them?" He paused to tilt his head on one side and regard Corvan with an alert and birdlike mischievousness. "I perform," he announced with decision.

Corvan remained unmoved.

"But not for them," he pointed out.

"How's that?" For the first time Snake Maddox seemed conscious that all was not cordiality in Corvan's smile.

"I like your style, Maddox," explained Corvan. "But you'll no doubt admit that the best introduction to a man who is wise to the general lay is not through his pockets. Your conversation and performances since then, however, have convinced me that that first impression was due to an excess of zeal on your part. But don't let your enthusiasm carry you too far. We don't know each other yet, but I'm all prepared to chum around with you as if we had been little pals from birth. Don't spoil it."

"Hell!" said Maddox blithely. "I didn't go to ruffle you up."

"No. Well, don't go to ruffle up the natives around here, either. That's what I mean by not spoiling it. If you try any of the old bunkum in this village, one of us goes home to New York; and home for me is right here, until the fall styles in hokum are called for."

With these words, the Great Corvan leisurely lit a cigarette. The Snake's face fell.

"Watdyermean, chief? Not string these hicks while the stringin' is good? For the love of Mike, you don't expect to let 'm all go by?"

Corvan smiled at him through the cigarette smoke.

"Right by," he said. "Anyway, until I've looked the ground over." He frowned. "You're not fool enough to suppose that we've taken this place and put in a plant for the sake of playing a lot of hicks with a cold deck, are you? It's the big stuff for the winter we're after, and we can't build a reputation on loaded dice. You're going to be a good little boy while you're down here, Maddox." He paused for the fraction of a second, only to swoop neatly in again, as Maddox opened his mouth to reply. "I wouldn't be surprised if you might go in for the Boy Scouts or something," he conjectured.

The Snake's eyes opened wide with the expression of a hurt child.

"Aw, chief!" he exclaimed.

"Or help out on some farm," continued Corvan.

Maddox tilted his head on one side with unbelieving ears.

"But, chief, you ain't got me!" he protested. Then he sprang into sudden action. He leaped across to the archway, and, after carefully shaking out the draperies, drew them discreetly across the opening. From the archway he glided over to a door which led to the rear. This he opened without rattling the latch, and, after inspecting the corridor behind it, as carefully closed it.

Then he approached Corvan with elaborate quiet, and indicated by a gesture that he was to sit upon the gate-ended davenport. Corvan obeyed, watching his companion with narrowed eyes, and Maddox seated himself upon the extreme edge of the davenport beside him. The Snake then spoke, assuming a remarkable grimace whereby it appeared that only that side of his face nearest Corvan was speaking; and he further excluded the other side of his face by curving his hand across the middle of his mouth and shutting it entirely from view. Thus his low voice might be said to have achieved the utmost in confidentialness.

"Chief," he whispered, "I got 'em all lined up. There ain't nothing to it. Nothing! See?" As he spoke, he insinuated himself closer to Corvan's side.

Corvan almost indiscernibly moved away from his informant, and, taking the diamond scarf pin from his necktie, put it in his pocket.

"Nothing to what?" he asked coldly.

Without removing his hand or returning his mouth to normal, Maddox managed to express injured innocence.

"The natives," he continued, deeply earnest. "I got 'em all lined up. The old lady give me the dope, an' I been lookin' things over."

"The old lady?"

"Sure. Mrs. Bland. It's like this. See, the hicks down here are all dead or crazy, and the ones what ain't are ripe for pickin'."

Corvan found it necessary to move again, and discovered himself firmly against the mahogany end of the

davenport. He made the best of this by buttoning up his coat and placing both his hands in his outside pockets.

"Ripe?" he queried.

"Aw, lay off, chief!" whispered Maddox. "I ain't takin' anything that belongs to you."

Corvan grinned.

"Merely an instinctive precaution," he assured him. "You were saying that the hicks who aren't dead or crazy are ripe."

Maddox returned to his subject.

"Sure," his inflections in the use of this word were various, but he invariably insinuated with it a rare sense of conviction. "Sure," he said. "Old Humphrey is ripe as a canned tomato. He owns about half of the world down here, and what he don't own he's got mortgaged. He owns this house, and we're payin' him more money for this summer's rent than the whole burg has seen since the record lobster catch of the 'eighties. He's one of them hard-boiled, tight-wadded, skinflints who support chain drug stores by buying up porous plasters to stick the dollar bills in their pockets with."

"And do I understand he's crazy?"

"No."

"Oh, he's the dead one."

"Hell, no. He wouldn't die till after the end of August, not if you tied him to the middle of Fifth Avenue at Forty-second Street and started the traffic."

"But he'll be tired of life after the end of August? What's the matter, can't he stand the Long Island winters?"

"No, you don't get me. That brings us down to the dead ones. The end of August is when his favorite mortgages comes due. That's his mortgage on the Fiske place. He wouldn't no more die before that than a kid would get sick before Christmas, and if the foreclosure don't come off, he'll bump off with a busted heart."

"And who is the dead one you refer to?"

"The one I had in mind was Fiske, but almost any little playmate of Lionel's is dead as far as our pickin's are concerned. Fiske, he's groggy as a cold-storage fish, and just waitin' for the grand K. O. Then there's Henry Sumpty. Ain't that the ultimate thing in names? Henry Sumpty!"

"I seem to have heard it before somewhere."

"Sure you have. We rented this house off him. Henry is Lionel's cousin by Lionel's third wife, which is the present one. The old boy owns Henry along with the rest of the vacant lots around here, and throws him little things like the renting of this dump, whenever Henry is deserving. I guess Henry ain't deserving most of the time, 'cause Henry had to sell his lobster pots and open a soft-drink parlor and pool room. That's down on the point. That's where I can run a real nice little game."

"That's where you're mistaken," said Corvan pointedly. "If these people get wise to the kind of a slicker you are, Maddox, we'll be lucky to get to the station ahead of the injured populace."

"But ain't I tellin' yer? They're dead. Dead from the ground up. You could paint Henry Sumpty's head yellow and sell it for a gold brick. And as for this

Humphrey sport! He's the hard-shell kid." Then, his face falling as he saw Corvan's mockery, "Aw, you know the kind he is, chief; he can't look past a dollar. Why, he even played his own son dirt because he went and married the daughter of a poor sucker who lapped up enough booze to prove that he hadn't carried any life insurance."

"It's no use, Maddox," decided Corvan. "We can't fool with the small fry. They're honest country people and we'd better leave them alone. God knows they earn every penny they've got." He arose, and, walking to the archway, threw the curtains back again. "And they haven't got enough to make it worth while," he finished whimsically.

"But this Humphrey stiff is rolling in it!" protested Maddox. "And honest! My good gosh! That bird has a good plain bunco steerer up against the ropes and gasping for breath when it comes to playing the suckers."

"Forget it," advised Corvan.

"Why, listen, chief, what d'you think of a guy that'd play a deal like this? This Humphrey has a son, see? A guy named Albert; he's by the first wife, and the luckiest, because she cashed in first. This Albert goes and takes a wad of money that his mother left him and marries a girl whose father takes the cash to buy a set of D. T.'s and knocks off as a result. All right. What, does the old boy do? He trots around to sonny's humble cottage, tells him he's married a gold digger who ain't any better than she might be, and says he ain't any son of his no more. Well, the son's got spirit, see?

'You says a mouthful,' he tells the old man. 'I ain't no son of yours, and if you come round this house again, I knock you for a row of barbed-wire entanglements.' See? And the old boy beats it, and his wife, too. I wouldn't put it past him. Anyway, this Albert changes his name to Trench—Albert Trench—and when he gets a kid of his own, he won't even let the old man see it; which don't worry the old man a whole lot, 'cause when the kid gets older it turns out he's bugs. Crazy as a loon. That's the kind of burg you're livin' in now."

But Corvan was unmoved.

"I've told you how we stand," he said. "These people down here are not people as far as we're concerned. They are just part of the scenery. You're a bright boy, Snake, but we're not working. Not down here."

Maddox regarded the future with unadulterated dissatisfaction.

"You mean we settle down in this dump like we enjoyed it?" he demanded.

Corvan frowned.

"Well, don't we?"

"No, we don't."

"Then play as if you did." Maddox was to learn the meaning of that deep, cold tone which Corvan now used. "Acting is the essence of successful con. Learn to act."

"Not me! Not Snake Maddox! I got a reputation for slipping out of trouble. Watch me slip on the night train. I blow on the seven twenty-eight."

"Not to-day you don't. You seem to forget that a

lot of boys of your age would be glad to have such a nice home as this. Settle down, my boy. Be domesticated."

"Aw, cut yer kidding! You can't keep me in this dump for a summer. All sand and a bunch of hicks. I wouldn't have come, only for the chance it gave me to perform. Oh, boy! The practice a guy could get! I could sell 'em the bay to plant oysters in! And not a dic in sight!" His eyes glistened.

Corvan frowned. He appreciated the worth of Maddox as a henchman, and was sensible of the need for a companion in what would no doubt be long days in this isolated spot. When a man possesses such a deep-seated contempt for humanity, as Corvan's profession had developed in his mind, the society of another of his own sphere is almost the only society tolerable. Corvan had already divined that the youthful Snake would provide him with amusing company; he did not relish the thought of his departing. Besides, there was the Snake's essential usefulness to be considered.

"Son," he said, "stick around. We've got to lay out bigger things than the selling of gold bricks to the brainless. If you've got the brains, that's what we need. You might have some ideas that will earn you a share of the pot."

Maddox shook his head.

"Not for me," he said. "I know where I get off, and it's before I come to your station. Give me time, and I'll be right with you. I ain't in that class. No, sir, I blow to-night!"

Corvan frowned at him thoughtfully. He would get the lay of this youth yet, and, when he did, Maddox would stay.

"Dinner's ready," announced Mrs. Bland from the dining room doorway, and the eyes of Snake Maddox shone effulgently.

"Oh, boy!" he enunciated, and turned to Corvan with enthusiasm. "You get better meals here than anywhere else in the world!" he cried. "I've never ate like it before in my life! Come on!"

Corvan fell in behind him with profound relief. He knew his Maddox now. He knew that he need worry about his youthful henchman's departure no longer. As long as Mrs. Bland was in the house, Maddox would stay.

CHAPTER IV

FATE RETURNS THE BOW

And Maddox did stay. Mrs. Bland's remarkable cooking and the luxury of a home, such as poor Maddox had never dreamed of in his life, did their subtle work. They combined to persuade the impetuous Snake to "stick around for a day or two," and Corvan's gift of smooth and persuasive talking made his tentative resolution firmer. Corvan was an artist in the holding forth of promises, and, determined that Snake Maddox should not desert him, he pushed his chair back from the breakfast table the following morning, and poured balm upon the desolation of the Snake.

"I've been thinking over what you said yesterday, Snake," he set forth. "And it doesn't sound so bad. You certainly have looked the crowd over down here, and I don't believe the oldest capper in the game ever got as good a line-up on the local situation as you seem to have obtained."

"Shucks," quoth Maddox modestly. "It was easy pickin's. You just roll in and make yourself nice to the ladies. I don't know how it is, but give me half an hour with a skirt, and I don't care whether she's young or old, a peach or a lime, she's got to come across. And can I get 'em talkin'? Watch me." He tipped back his

head and inverted his coffee cup over it, to drain the liquid sugar at the bottom with peculiar noises. "Good cawfee," he pronounced.

Corvan grinned.

"You keep your shirt on, Maddox, and I'll run down to the village this morning and look 'em over," he said.

But as the Great Corvan drove his big car toward the village that morning, he was conscious of the fact that he had not been quite frank with Maddox. The life of this obscure fishing village, as retailed to him by the eloquent Snake the preceding afternoon, had interested Corvan, but it had not interested him as a prospective sucker list. He was surprised and somewhat disconcerted to discover that those parts of Maddox's recital which had appealed to him the most had been the parts which dealt with the greedy fate that hung over the Fiske homestead; the futile, stumbling career of Henry Sumpty; the tragedy of misunderstanding in the marriage of Albert Humphrey, and the boy who grew up an idiot.

A long experience had brought Corvan to the dark suspicion that every human being was what is known to the profession which he followed as a sucker; and every time he had his hair cut, or paid a tailor's bill, he knew that he was no exception. But Maddox had presented these people to him as people had not been presented to him before. He had come to East Harbor prepared to regard the natives as part of the landscape; he now found himself regarding them as human beings. Was this a part of the mood which had turned him from the game?

Dwelling upon this, Corvan let his car roll slowly along the country roads, and was subconsciously aware of the sweet scent of new-cut grass, and of the wild grapes that grew along the fences. Between the road and the bay, only a broad stretch of uncultivated and flowered meadows lay. The sky was a profound blue; a rich, bright atmosphere which could be penetrated but not plumbed. That blue was reflected from the water, and the water was broken by the uneven shore line of the meadows, which, advancing and retreating from the water's edge, finally stretched boldly forth into those long sandy points, tree-covered, which form East Harbor. In the clear atmosphere, Corvan could distinguish the nets of the fishermen as they lay stretched to dry outside the shacks along the points; and the clear outline of the fishing boats in the harbor appeared to him as though they were suspended in the air above the meadows. He felt a desire to walk across those meadows; he felt a subdued wish to stand upon that point; and then he pulled himself together.

He was Corvan, the Great Corvan, of Broadway and the Roaring Forties. He was of the city, and he was wise. These sandy wastes were fields of inertia and decay. Even vegetables could not thrive in them.

"Wonder how much it's worth an acre?" his wiser self prompted him to question. "Might buy some of it, and start a water-front land boom. Nobody'd ever build there, so it wouldn't spoil the view."

He smiled crookedly, feeling more like himself again, and then he drew his car up under a huge beech tree

which stretched its boughs well nigh across the road. He had come in sight of the general store, post office, and ice-cream parlor (Wednesdays and Saturdays) which was the heart of the village of East Harbor. He decided to approach the store on foot. His car would be too conspicuous for the purposes of such casual conversation as he desired. So he stopped his engine, and, springing out, walked forward, his slim, distinguished figure more conspicuous in its outing suit of fine homespun than his car would have been.

Outside the general store a number of the village youth were gathered. They were gathered for the most part along the fence which ran obliquely from the store front to the road; and they disturbed the serenity of Corvan's mood with jeers, hoots, and lamentations. The lamentations came from Jimmie Sumpty, Henry's second, who had gone too far in the matter of baiting Harold Trench, the idiot. The hoots and jeers were provided by the general ensemble, who egged Jimmie on.

At the moment when Corvan approached this group, Harold Trench sat upon the fence and mouthed angry protests at Jimmie, whose arm he held in the powerful grip of an enraged lunatic. Trench was an oversized boy of seventeen, and he was not a pretty sight. One of his obsessions had to do with the uselessness of shoes, and since, as soon as he got away from his overworked mother, he invariably threw these appendages from him, his feet were now exposed through the ragged and dusty fabric of his stockings. His cotton shirt front was stained with the droppings of food and drink, and his

patched and torn trousers hung like a divided bag from his twisted belt. His face was not naturally bad looking, but the deadly lack of luster in his eyes, and the loose hang of his lower jaw gave it the repulsive aspect of insanity. The sirupy stains of cheap candy bedecked his mouth and mingled with the dust and grime of his countenance. This sickening figure, having been teased beyond control, now sat perched unsteadily on the fence, and, holding his smaller tormentor with unreasonable strength, stuttered and mouthed an earnest admonition into the youngster's ear. The others, who were for the most part older boys, laughed at these antics and the idiot's words. They urged the almost weeping Jimmie to fight.

"Push him off the fence, Jim!" cried one.

"That's right, Harold. You spank him!" yelled another.

As Corvan drew nearer, he would have turned his eyes away from the repulsive spectacle, for he was a fastidious man, but in that instant an urchin, inspired by the encouragement of his elders, rushed forward and gave Harold Trench a violent shove. Trench, releasing Jimmie's arm, arose with his feet on a lower rail of the fence, and tottered with wild gestures for his balance. With an inarticulate cry, he tottered there, then his face fell into a horrible twitching, and, with a fit upon him, he plunged forward, to fall with a thud upon the sand. At that, several of the younger boys scattered in confusion and horror; the others, equally horror-stricken, closed in.

Corvan, who had seen the fall of the idiot boy, and caught a glimpse of the twitching form, and sick, green face, before the boys closed about it, instinctively veered away. He was too well controlled, and too fastidious, to be thrilled at the sight of an accident, and having lived his life in a city where such occurrences were taken care of with almost automatic promptitude, he felt no obligation to assist.

With involuntary, unconscious distaste, he now veered away, when Margaret Fiske appeared magically in the store doorway, and rushed toward the little knot about the fallen boy. She had seen Trench's fall through the store window, but she appeared to Corvan with the startling suddenness of a vision; a vision of lithe, fresh youth in pink and white calico, and she bore down upon the frightened boys like an avenging and ministering spirit. Corvan halted in his tracks and watched.

"You fiends!" cried the girl. "You've hurt him!" And, scattering the shamefaced youths, she fell to her knees upon the sand and drew the idiot's twisting head toward her. Corvan winced with distaste as he saw that horrible head drawn upon the crisp calico of her lap, and then winced again as he saw the girl draw forth a snowy handkerchief and wipe away the froth from about the writhing lips. Her fine, fair head was bent toward the face of the stricken boy. Corvan frowned. It was too uncannily like Beauty and the Beast come true.

"Oh!" she murmured. "We must carry him in." She looked up and studied the faces around her hopelessly.

Then a peculiar thing happened to Corvan. He had

never looked upon a thing like this before. Here was charity, stripped of all consciousness. Here was the delicate, the clean, and the wholesome, bent to succor the stricken, repulsive, and oppressed. While he, a strong man, and, he saw in that moment, not of the finest, a crook, in short, had veered away from the fallen idiot as a thing too horrible to touch, this girl had rushed to the boy without hesitation, without a question of whether she were too delicate a thing to deal with such a case. And even as Corvan felt that wave of emotion, which mingled admiration for her with a disgust and deep reproach for himself, the slight and fragile figure of the girl was striving to lift the heavy idiot to his feet.

CHAPTER V

MARGARET

Swiftly upon his thought his action followed. Corvan sprang to the girl's side without a word, and took the burden from her. The boy's limbs were twitching spasmodically, and his mouth worked open and shut, snapping his teeth. A trickle of blood ran from his lips. Seizing the boy vigorously by the shoulders, Corvan drew him up to a sitting posture.

"It's epilepsy!" he pronounced briefly. "Give me that bit of wood!"

She hurriedly obeyed him, her eyes turning from the pallid face of the boy to the countenance of the newcomer which shone now with a vigor and purpose that appeared upon the confidence man's face like a newfound life. He snatched the bit of wood from her and deftly insinuated it between the working jaws of the epileptic.

"He can't bite his tongue now!" he explained. She glanced at the boy's face with a horrified doubt, but even as she glanced, Corvan had arisen with the boy in his arms, and had turned to the car that stood waiting up the road. She followed him, hurrying close behind his masterful, striding figure.

The boy was a heavy burden, a greater weight than

Corvan had imagined he would be, but the man betrayed no sign of the effort he was making. With steady gait, he strode to the car, and heaved his burden to his shoulder so that he might throw open the door; but the girl was before him. With an arm on his shoulder, she leaned forward and opened the door. She was amazed at the steel band of muscle which moved under the gray homespun which she touched.

"My, but you're strong!" she cried. It was an involuntary expression of admiration, and, because he knew it was involuntary, he felt a thrill of pleasure and pride. He further exhibited the fine condition of his body, when, with the boy's weight in his arms, he leaned forward and deposited his burden in the rear of the car.

"Jump in!" he ordered. "We must drive him home."

The run was a short one, and Margaret, conscious of the twitching burden in the rear, hardly noticed the speed with which they traversed it; but as he whisked the car in through the narrow gate that broke the fence of Albert Trench's yard, she glanced with wonder at the cool, preoccupied face of the man beside her. It had not seemed possible that the car could have made that entry; that it could have been made without slowing down seemed to the girl miraculous.

But she had no time to dwell upon the matter. The car stopped, Corvan was out, and, with the boy in his arms, approached the door. She strode at his side, so that he could feel her lithe, youthful figure at his elbow, and, as she reached across him to open the door, he could feel her hand again upon his shoulder. It was a slim

brown hand, exquisitely smooth and well formed. He caught a quick glimpse of it as he passed her with his burden. And he remembered it. In the room an older woman appeared. It was the boy's mother. Mrs. Trench had long since become accustomed to these woeful invasions of strong men who accompanied the limp figure of her son. But she had not before seen a stranger do that service; nor had her boy been brought home so dreadfully still and deathly pale before. With a gasp of dismay, she hurried forward and indicated a couch upon which Corvan laid his burden.

Again Margaret was close at his side. Again her lithe figure touched his, and he found her head close to his; the scent of her brown hair reached him. As he drew himself erect again, breathing deeply, he let his hand fall upon her arm, and she did not seem to notice it. She looked up into his face, her own bright with admiration.

"That was good of you," she said.

And he smiled into her eyes.

"You don't understand," he murmured, with an embarrassment new to him. "You shamed me. You made it necessary for me to do it. I was ashamed when I saw you go to him. When I saw his head upon your lap. That's why I did it." He felt it was important that she should know the truth of this.

He turned to the mother.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am," he assured her. "He'll be all right."

He gazed carefully at the boy.

"He's coming out of it now," he said. And, taking

the bit of wood from the loose mouth, he drew out his handkerchief and wiped the bloodstained lips.

"He fell off the fence at the store," he said. "I think he's all right now; but I'll run up to Brookhampton and fetch the doctor."

The mother, calm enough as mothers are on such occasions, looked her gratitude.

"That would be kind of you," she said.

As Corvan climbed into his car again, he felt peculiar gladness. It was a sensation that he had experienced in boyhood but long since forgotten, because it was the sensation that follows the doing of a good deed. It was happiness. And in a definite way, the girl had a part in that happiness, making it the keener. He started his motor, and the girl came running from the house.

"I can't tell you how much I thank you," she said; and he wondered that she could be so heartily thankful for a service done for an idiot boy who meant nothing whatever to her. Even as he wondered, she explained it.

"Summer people—like you—" she said, "don't often help us like you did to-day. You couldn't have been kinder if he'd been your son. I want you to know we are grateful."

"But it was for you—" he blurted out. He found that the gift of smooth talking had miraculously deserted him, and decided he had better shut up. "I must hurry," he explained. "That was a bad fall." And he sent the car plunging forward.

"I'll be here when you get back!" she cried after him.

CHAPTER VI

SNAKE GETS A SURPRISE

Up the road along which he had rolled so leisurely in the morning, Corvan now raced with headlong speed. His foot pressed the accelerator with uncompromising tension, and he grudgingly released it to whirl about every curve with the abandonment of the saucer track. Words were ringing in his ears, and his thoughts dealt fugitively with them, as he deftly played with the wheel.

"Summer people, like you," she had said. She had excluded him from her world with the definite and unconscious exclusion of the proudest society. And her's was a world worth living in. A world where the tragedies of one were the tragedies of all. Where a fallen idiot was an object for succor by the fairest, the most delicate, of mortals as if he were her brother. And from that she shut him out.

"Summer people like you!"

Yet she was more generous than she knew. The Great Corvan was not even to be included in the innocuous snobbery of summer people. He brought to these quiet roadways a touch of something less desirable than snobbery. Something of the reek of a city's under-world. He remembered Jed Grimshaw in the lantern light as a

man remembers that his hands are stained with pitch. His lips curled savagely. In the presence of the girl's quick, unhesitating ministrations to the boy, he had felt himself unworthy. And yet he would like to have a place in her world. As he sped through the green meadows past the clear, clean coast line, he wished that he might belong to that old manor house in which he lived.

And, whisking about the corner from which the driveway led into the grounds of the estate, he nearly ran down Snake Maddox and two youths of the village. On a stone by the roadside Maddox was throwing dice with them.

Corvan brought his car to a whining halt.

"Hello, Maddox!" he snapped. And the Snake arose to approach him with a grin.

"Easy money, chief," he whispered.

"Put 'em up, Maddox!" snapped Corvan in a low voice. "And don't bring 'em out again till we've looked 'em over!"

"What dyer mean?" Maddox was surprised and hurt.

"What I say. Put 'em up. If there's big money, don't spoil it for the little ones."

There was no mistaking Corvan's tone, and Maddox slipped the dice into his pocket with resignation and disgust. He resented the fear that Corvan inspired when he adopted this tone.

"There's an epileptic boy down in the village," continued Corvan. "He's had a bad fall, and needs the doctor. I won't be home for lunch."

Maddox looked up at him quickly. This was a new turn.

"Aw, there's clam fritters," he laughed. "Telephone from the house."

"No, I'm driving in. And I'm only hitting the bumps. Tell Mrs. Bland; its important."

Maddox was at a loss. Surely the great and leisurely Corvan wasn't going to run around the country just to fetch a doctor for the bug-house kid.

"What's eatin' you, chief?" he asked. "Leave 'em run an ambulance down for the stiff."

Corvan started his engine.

"Keep that line for the city, Snake," he snapped inpatiently. "Down here we've got to play square with our neighbors."

"Neighbors!" gasped Maddox.

"Sure. The people who live next door."

"God, chief, I believe you've got 'em," cried Maddox spitefully. "The country's driving you bugs. You stepped off into the sand here, and you can't get out. Like quicksand, that's what it is. An' it's gettin' you."

"Get off the running board, Snake," snapped Corvan; and he started the car. "And send your little playmates home." He was gone in a roar and a cloud of dust.

Maddox swore.

"Gettin' a doctor for the village nut!" he gasped unbelievingly. And then, to the ardent sportsmen at the roadside: "I gotta go up to the house."

He resented the power of Corvan's voice, but he obeyed it.

CHAPTER VII

HAROLD TRENCH

Corvan made the eight miles to Brookhampton in something less than eleven minutes, and, coming back again, made of the doctor a religious man. It was not that the doctor was lacking in protest; he protested against Corvan's wild speed in the name of everything from the Almighty to a sense of civic virtue; but Corvan was a preoccupied man, and the doctor's protests were in vain.

If you consistently press down upon its accelerator, you will find that a high-powered car is an engrossing object. Corvan had eyes and ears for nothing but the road, and, fleeting through the subconscious stratum of his thoughts, was the desire to swing once more between those white gate-posts of the Trench cottage, and see if she was there to greet him.

She was.

"Gracious! but you are back quick!" she exclaimed, standing in the doorway. The doctor gave her a brief greeting and passed into the house. leaving them alone on the little veranda.

"How is he?" asked Corvan.

"Better. I don't think the fall hurt him. He seems to have come out of it just as usual."

He discerned the regret and the hopelessness with which she spoke of the boy's malady.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

As he spoke, there flashed into his mind the words that Snake had spoken. "It's like quicksand, and it's getting you." He was gazing at the girl. He felt an almost overwhelming desire to be something more to her than "the summer people—like you."

"Do they consider this case hopeless?" he asked her.

She nodded. Again he was conscious that the gift of smooth talking would not avail him here. He must try to control himself.

"You know," he said, "I told you this morning that I was ashamed. You didn't understand me then, but I should like you to know what I meant. I saw that they were driving that boy into a fit, before it happened, and I saw him take that fall. But I walked around it." He saw a little shadow cross her brow. "You can't understand that, can you?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"It was just an impulse," she said.

"No, it wasn't. It was just that I am not accustomed to helping people, like you are. And then I saw you run out, and take his head upon your lap. And, you know, I can't tell you what that meant to me. It made me feel ashamed."

Her face was very grave. She frowned as she examined his eyes.

"But we're accustomed to it. To Harold's fits, I mean," she said. Then she smiled, as though satisfied with her conclusion. "That's all it amounts to. You

see when you live next to a person who has fits all the time, you just naturally run and help him. That's all."

With indescribable amazement, Corvan perceived that she was excusing him; seeking a charitable explanation for his selfishness. It stirred a cord which was profoundly buried in his heart; a cord which had not been stirred since childhood. A rush of words came into his mind, which he could not utter. Warm, demonstrative words they were. "You angel!" he would have cried. "Oh, God! what a swine I am!" But he was enough the Great Corvan to know that such words would never do. With an effort he controlled himself; but he could not control those revealing windows which were his eyes, and he saw reflected in the eyes of the girl an emotion which was akin to his. This moment, he perceived, could only end in a wordless parting, and he could not endure that, so he spoke coolly, and masterfully brought the perilous moment under rein.

"Do *you* think that the case is a hopeless one?"

Her expression changed, betraying a quick surprise.

"Why do you ask me that?" she said.

"You seem to be deeply interested in the poor boy. And I know that you are too brave to accept a hopeless verdict without a struggle. Even if it is only a mental struggle. Do you really think your friend's case is hopeless?"

She left the doorway in which she had been standing, and walked to the edge of the veranda with a quick, nervous stride. She stood for an instant looking over

the quiet meadows and the bay beyond, as though seeking counsel there. Then she turned upon him quickly.

"I don't know what made you ask me that," she said. "I've thought of it often. But when I first mentioned it to the people here, Doctor Stevens wouldn't let them listen. He was rude, and they wouldn't listen to me. But I believe there is a hope for Harold. I do!" She gazed with bright eyes at him, and was encouraged by his gravity. "It isn't just a foolish thought!" she assured him. "I've inquired about, and written letters. I'm sure he has a chance! If these people would only listen!"

"Why are you so sure?"

"In Michigan, in Battleburg, that's the name of the town—there is a great specialist, and he has cured more cases of epilepsy than any other doctor in the world. He has taken them after all the others have given them up. And he has cured them. I'm sure of that. I have the figures."

"And you think Harold should be sent there?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything of his condition?"

"Yes. You see he wasn't like this when he was young. He was a lovely boy, one of the brightest little fellows I've ever seen. Then when he was about seven years old he started having fits; but it didn't seem to affect his mind. It was only two or three years ago that he started to act peculiarly. Then he became worse, and had the most awful headaches. Now, of course, he's a regular idiot, and he has fits every few days." As she spoke, tears filled her eyes. He could see that she

suffered in sympathy with the boy as though he were her own. "Oh, it's terrible!" she cried, with a catch in her breath. "To see him! He could have been so fine!"

There was a little pause, while he stood gravely watching her.

"Well, I heard of this doctor and wrote to him. Doctor Compton, his name is. I told him the whole history of Harold's case, and he has sent me a good many letters." She looked at him a trifle defiantly. "He says that he thinks the chances are good for a cure," she said.

"You're sure he's the real thing?"

"I know it. I've looked him up. Oh, I've gone into it thoroughly. It seems half the cases of epilepsy are due to a poisonous matter that is made in—glands that ought to help purify the system. He thinks that Harold's case is like that, because of the headaches—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Corvan. "Can you remember what those glands are called?"

"Peyer's," she said. "The Peyer's Glands. They are found in the intestines. The part called the cecum. Doctor Compton says epilepsy of this form will sometimes cause a growth in the brain, a thickening of the tissue, or something; and that seems to be Harold's case. If we get it in time, he thinks an operation can remedy the brain part of it, and then he can cure him of the other trouble just as he cures the others. That's the only kind he can treat, the epilepsy that comes from the gland trouble." She smiled. "I'm afraid I haven't made it very clear," she said.

"Clear enough for me," he remarked with a brevity that sounded almost businesslike. "Guess we'll go in and have a chat with the doctor."

"Don't," she cried. "He won't listen to you."

"He doesn't have to," said Corvan. "That's in the constitution. But he can't prevent me from talking." He turned to the door. "That's in the constitution, too, you know. Right of free speech. You go and sit in the car," he advised her. Then he saw that she had expected to enter with him. "Better not come in. It would look like collusion."

She smiled her understanding, and he entered.

CHAPTER VIII

CORVAN PUTS OVER A DEAL

When Mr. Daniel Corvan entered the living room of the Trench cottage, the invalid was sitting in a rocking-chair. His face was pale, and his head was bandaged; he stared vacantly at his mother who spoke in a low voice with the doctor. Albert Trench stood behind his son, and scowled hopelessly at the carpet.

"Good morning," said Corvan.

The mother came forward. Because of the assaults of life, she appeared old before her time; because she was brave beyond the common, her smile had the courage of youth in it.

"I guess you're Mr. Corvan," she greeted him, "you took the old Humphrey place. It was real kind of you to help Harold like you did. Albert, this is the gentleman who brought Harold home, and he went for the doctor, too."

Albert Trench came forward and shook hands with Corvan. He was surly with the sullenness of discouragement.

"Thank you kindly," he said.

"Don't bother about that," said Corvan cheerily. "It was the young lady." Then he turned his personality upon the room. An army of the mute, obscure victims

of the Great Corvan could have warned these people then that they stood no chance whatever. The best confidence man of his generation was about to put over a deal on them.

"What would you say was the nature of this case, doctor?" he asked heartily. The doctor took upon himself a heavy dignity.

"A form of epilepsy. Inherited, I should say," he glanced at the mother, considerately, "from some remote source."

Corvan elevated a surprised eyebrow.

"Really? He's been afflicted since birth, eh?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Trench, "no, indeed. Harold was quite all right until—until he was seven years old." She turned tear-filled eyes away.

"Well, that seems to do away with any idea of inheritance!" Corvan protested. Doctor Stevens scowled.

"You asked for information," he snapped. "It isn't customary to take every stranger into the details of a case."

"Of course not. But, as it happens, I've had a good deal of experience with epilepsy. I take it that you have too, doctor."

"Epileptics don't form the major part of our population, Mr. Corvan." Doctor Stevens assumed an acidity which should have curled the stranger up. But it didn't.

"Of course not. But I have been able to study no less than a dozen cases in my time, and I assure you they were very interesting. Happily, ten of the cases were cured."

"Cured!" It was a cry of hope which sprang simultaneously from both mother and father.

"Yes, cured. You know at least twenty per cent of such cases can be cured."

"Nonsense!" Doctor Stevens quite forgot himself. "Mr. Corvan, you don't seem to understand the situation here. You raise false hopes in these good people. The cure of a case of epilepsy is so rare as to be almost miraculous."

Corvan smiled just the right sort of smile; not too patronizing; not too irritating.

"Of course, you don't have much opportunity to keep abreast of things down here, Doctor Stevens. But what I tell you is an absolute fact. My very close friend, Doctor Compton of Battleburg, Michigan, is the greatest authority on a certain form of epilepsy in the world; and at least thirty per cent of the cases he treats are cured. Have you ever looked into the possibilities of the Peyer's Glands, Doctor Stevens?"

The mother and father of the invalid were now standing still and tense, engrossed in the momentous debate.

"Peyer's Glands!" snapped the man of medicine peevishly. "What have Peyer's Glands got to do with it?"

Corvan's expression conveyed a polite "I told you so."

"Everything. You are familiar with the proper function of those glands, I presume?"

"Of course."

Corvan did not betray his relief at having passed a dangerous crisis.

"And you don't know their relation to epilepsy?"

"You talk in riddles," fumed the doctor. "There is no relation."

"Oh! Then my friend Doctor Compton has worked to no purpose for fifteen years, and had been curing his cases merely by blind luck."

"Let me tell you that I've heard of your Doctor Compton," cried the physician, "and he's a mere bonesetter."

"Beyond the fact that it's quite as nice to be cured by a bonesetter as to be cured by Hippocrates himself, we won't argue that. The fact remains that the glands I have spoken of sometimes secrete a toxin that poisons the system and causes epilepsy. This form of epilepsy Doctor Compton can cure, and, since it is the only form which causes the patient to lose the control of his mind, I conclude that it is that form our young friend here is suffering from."

Observe now with what cunning Corvan had led his hearers on. Having convinced them that this affluent and influential stranger was familiar with their son's complaint, he further inspired them with confidence in the unknown healer by obviously confounding the unfortunate Stevens, who, be it said, knew nothing whatever about the phenomena Corvan had spoken of. It was now time for the grand hurrah, which is the slang of Corvan's profession for the proper moment to land your sucker. Corvan turned to the parents.

"I think, Mr. Trench," he said, "that your boy is in a critical position. It's quite obvious that our friend Doctor Stevens can do nothing for him here; and it is possible that, if you wait any longer, it will be too late

for Doctor Compton to take the case. I suggest that you send Harold out to Michigan immediately."

At this, Doctor Stevens arose to defend his own.

"Albert Trench, if you do as this man suggests, I give up the case immediately."

"There isn't any case left," said Corvan. "If you'll let me run you over to the train, Mr. Trench, you can have Harold under Doctor Compton's care within forty-eight hours."

"Mr. Corvan seems to know, doc," said Trench slowly.

"He does know," cried Mrs. Trench unexpectedly. And again Corvan felt that inexpressible sensation of unworthiness. This woman trusted him. A year ago he would have felt proud; now he had to convince himself quickly of the worth of his cause to endure her unaffected confidence in him.

"But, Mary, we can't," whispered Trench. "We couldn't even afford to send him up to New York."

Corvan frowned.

"I hope, Mr. Trench, that you are going to let me defray the expenses of this trip. You mustn't let—" But Trench cut him short.

"We ain't beggars," he said.

"No, but you're not in a position to consider yourselves, either. It's a man's future you're playing with. If Compton can see this thing through, you'll have your son back as fine and sound as you are."

The mother's eyes met the father's, Corvan caught the glance that they exchanged.

"It's unwise—" protested the discarded physician, but Corvan pushed him aside.

"A new man!" he cried. "For God's sake, don't let pride and money enter this! If he is remade, he can repay me a thousand times!"

That glance of the two parents, of hope and of smoldering, daring vision, was turned upon him now, and the last shreds of the Great Corvan fell away.

"He can repay me in friendship alone!" he cried. And Doctor Stevens was definitely out of it.

"Pack quickly," urged Corvan. "And you can take Harold out to Michigan to-night."

CHAPTER IX

THE AWKWARDNESS OF TRUTH

Corvan left the Trench's to prepare for the adventure, and, hopping into his car, swept forth to find the girl again, forgetting altogether the disconcerted man of medicine whom he left to regain Brookhampton as best he could. Before he left, Mrs. Trench had told him where she might be found. It was the Fiske Farm, and he would know it by the lilac and the Rose of Sharon which bloomed in the front yard. He remembered that, and found her sitting on a low veranda which ran about the old farmhouse. It was well-nigh hidden by the rambler roses which climbed upon its pillars, and she, in a wicker rocking-chair, her lap piled high with sewing, was framed by the green and blossomed growth, and the Rose of Sharon which flanked the pathway. He sat for a moment, silent, and gazed at that quiet figure. Then he vaulted from the car like a boy and hurried up the pathway.

"It's done!" he cried exuberantly. "Harold Trench leaves for Michigan to-night. We must wire the doctor!"

She became brilliant with happiness.

"Oh!" she cried. "It's fine! Fine!" And then, after staring at him for a moment, she dashed off into the house, shouting: "Mother! Mother! Hear the good

news. Oh, it's GOOD news!" And he heard her bounding up the stairs.

When she returned she was a little confused.

"I'm sorry to have run away like that, but the news made me so happy that I just went crazy, I guess."

"I'm glad to have helped you out," he assured her; and she became serious.

"I don't know how to thank you. For all of us, I mean. It all seemed so hopeless, and then you came along like an angel—or something."

"Just something, I guess. It isn't much for a man to step in and advise a sick boy's parents to let him be cured, when the details have all been arranged by somebody else's hard work."

"That's nonsense. It would be just the same as ever if you hadn't come here. Mother is just as glad as I am; Mrs. Trench is such a dear. She couldn't come down—my mother, I mean—because she's heels over head in housework, but she wants you to stay to dinner."

"Well, that's kind of her."

"You will, won't you?" She glanced at him anxiously. "I want you to stay, too," she urged.

"Then I'll stay."

"That's good."

"I'm sorry your mother won't let me meet her now. I hope she won't stand on ceremony."

"No, it isn't that; but we don't have maids and things down here, you know. Mother is kept pretty hard at work." She frowned at her sewing.

"Of course."

He watched her as she plied her needle.

"What are you making?" he asked.

"What does it look like?"

"Sheets?"

"No, a tablecloth, and I'm not making it. Just darning."

"I didn't know you darned tablecloths."

"We darn everything, Mr. Corvan. I guess this is the darndest house I've ever seen."

"They get worn out, I suppose."

"They've been worn out so long that they haven't any further to get. Look at that! I've started darning the darns, now."

"We've got lots of tablecloths over at the house. Probably Mrs. Bland could spare some."

"If you go selling old Lionel Humphrey's dry goods," she laughed, "he'll have the law on you. Anyway, nothing belonging to him could come into this house until he's put a mortgage on it. It's one of his unbreakable rules."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, there's nothing to feel sorry about, Mr. Corvan. Mortgages are just as common with us as darns."

"I mean I didn't intend to touch on—on business matters."

"Why not?" She spoke quite quietly, and without a touch of bitterness. He wondered if she felt resigned. "Everybody talks business when they come here. Farming is father's business, and mortgages are Mr.

Humphrey's business. Somehow, the two got mixed up together."

"Is your father's farm very heavily mortgaged, Miss Fiske?"

"You'd better talk that over with dad. I guess it's not so much weight that troubles dad as the time limit. But please don't let me just talk about our own affairs. What is your business, Mr. Corvan?"

And there it was. What was his business? Corvan felt a cold band close about his heart, and he sat silent for a moment.

"I'm a promoter," he finally informed her.

"A promoter? What a funny business. You mean you're principal of a school?"

"Well, no. You see, I organize companies and sell the stock, or get people to finance them."

"Oh, I see. You deal in live stock."

He smiled, but in his heart he did not smile. To him, his very presence on the veranda of this farmer who laboriously struggled to rear such a child as this under the weight of heavy debts seemed to imply an insult. He seemed to flaunt easy money in the face of an honest man who knew nothing of ease.

"You don't quite understand. You see, before a thing can be manufactured, a lot of money has to be scraped together to build the plant, and so forth. My business is to incorporate a company and see that the money is raised."

"Oh, and then you make things?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I just raise the money by selling

shares in the company. For that I get a commission, and that ends my part in it."

He breathed deeply after that. This mendacious explanation of his activities had been hard. He prayed that she would not press it. If she did, he felt that he must repudiate the lie, and bring his brief happiness to nothing. She did not press him, however, she did worse.

"That doesn't seem a very important work," she said, thoughtfully.

"No," he admitted quietly, "it isn't."

"Oh, but I shouldn't have said that!" she cried with quick realization. "I'm sorry, Mr. Corvan. It was so foolish of me."

"Not at all. You were quite right." In the little silence that followed, he glanced across the blossoming yard and over the fields beyond. "Do you stay here all winter?" he asked.

"Why, of course," she assented.

"Of course. Working the farm."

"Yes. Working the farm," she laughed at the phrase.

And Corvan fell into a silence while she plied her needle. Working the farm. And he came down here to talk of his easy money. While they worked the farm, summer and winter. Working, mending, darning; and getting more deeply into debt.

She had been quite right. He didn't belong with such people as they were. He didn't belong in the same world with them. He didn't have the right to sit here on her veranda and speak with her in this familiar manner. He had no right.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked him.

"I was thinking," he said, "that I can't stay here to dinner this evening." He saw her face fall, her eyes fill with reproof; and he knew that she reproved not him, but herself. "Please don't feel badly about it," he begged her. "It is just that I have remembered a business matter. I must be back at the house for a telephone message." He sought vainly for some convincing word.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I offended you, didn't I?"

"No! No! A thousand times no! I assure you it is another reason. It's business."

Abruptly she became reserved.

"Mother will be very sorry," she said.

"But I am sorry, too. Please don't feel badly."

"Oh, of course not," she smiled a friendly smile. "You'll come some other time, won't you?"

He gazed hopelessly out at the shining car in the road.

"Yes," he said, "of course." And he found himself walking miserably down the pathway. "Damned fool!" he reviled himself. "Come out of your pipe dreams. You don't belong here. You just don't belong."

CHAPTER X

CORVAN STEPS WARILY

He rolled recklessly back to the spacious old house, which, in its manorial dignity, was an epitome of the countryside, and, finding Maddox away, dined, lonely, in the paneled dining room. Then he sat again on the great mahogany davenport, and smoked innumerable cigarettes over the problem which engrossed him.

Quicksand, Maddox had called it. The sand that was the soul of this countryside. The soul that had its highest expression in the clear heart of Margaret Fiske; that he had seen when she drew the stricken boy toward her; that he had glimpsed in the eyes of the mother when she first saw hope. The simple, unmasked soul of human beings, which had never been revealed to him before. It was as though he gazed out from the sly, quick world he knew, into a new place.

And then he remembered Wade. Wade, who was at this moment clenching his cigar between tight-shut teeth, as he contemplated the seeds of graft which the Great Corvan could bring to fruit for him in the coming season. And Corvan grinned his crooked grin, as he recognized that the grim, hard figure of Wade, in its uncompromising devotion to "the gang," stood for what was to him life itself. With Wade in mind he knew

that, whatever sentiment might be conjured in a man by a girl's bright eyes, the long past of the Great Corvan could not be changed thereby.

"I'm a crook," he silently assured himself; and unwittingly he quoted his partner's words. "I'm the best confidence man that ever steered a sucker to the slaughter," he reflected, "and my record's clean as a whistle. That is me. Nothing can make me another man. And nobody in the world can say there's a better. Not in my line, anyway."

In short, said Corvan to himself, Maddox was right, but Maddox was impulsive. Because the quicksand lay at his feet, and because unwarily he had stepped into it, did not argue that he must resign himself to it. That was for lesser men than he. The Great Corvan who had played with the weaknesses of humanity all his life could play with sentimentality as well. He would see this affair of the Trench's through, and sip his little sup of satisfaction therefrom; but, as he had evaded anger, spite and vengeance in the past, he would come out of it—clean.

Which is to say that he would come out of it, the Great Corvan.

So he rolled forth to keep his appointed meeting with Albert Trench and his idiot son.

CHAPTER XI

THE SNAKE SHOWS 'EM

Meantime, while Corvan resisted the grasp of the East Harbor sands, Snake Maddox arose to new heights of fortune in Henry Sumpty's pool room on the point.

The evening had started quietly with a game of pool in which Snake had assumed the part of spectator, with only a casual and quite honest interest in the erratic play of Bud Martin, whom the discerning Snake picked as the winner. It was only due to an unfortunate ignorance of the wide experience which prompted the Snake's choice of champion that Curt Wimble lost a dollar ninety-five on the side bets. After the pool game was over, further play lagged. This was due to the profound interest of the crowd in a discussion started by Snake, of the dastardly part played by the junior officers in the recent war. Snake, it appeared, had not suffered alone, and it was during Curt's somewhat protracted recital of the indignities endured by him at the hands of authority, that Snake held a half-hearted battle with himself against a strong desire to set Corvan's advice at naught and play a little game. In that struggle, Maddox's better self stood very little chance. The desire was strong, and the better self was retiring almost to the point of total absence from the field of battle; and when Maddox called into action the

argument that Corvan would never know anything about it, anyway, the better self silently stole away. Immediately upon its withdrawl, Snake Maddox took his dice from his pocket, and, half sitting upon the table, pretended to while away the latter moments of Curt Wimble's protest by rolling the little ivory cubes upon the green baize.

"Uh—HUH!" he exclaimed, as though to himself. "Up jumps the devil!" Or, breathing hotly upon the dice as they lay in his palm, he would fling them upon the baize, or murmur a desire that the sweet li'l bebbies unfold that se'm.

Curt Wimble finished his recital because his hearers obviously turned to a sound which pleased them better.

"Hot dice!" whispered Maddox, evidently quite oblivious to his surroundings. "Tumble over to the edge and lift yo' faces *UP! UP* to poppa! *UP!* And he snatched them from the board again to glance about him at the interested group which watched. He caught the eye of Bud Martin.

"What you say it comes up a four?" he challenged with a winning smile.

"Two to one!" snapped Curt Wimble promptly.

"Same here!" cried Bud.

"Two to one. Dollars or cents?" grinned Snake.

For answer, Curt threw a two-dollar bill on the table. Bud Martin followed it.

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Maddox, addressing the dice. "Do you hear them babies talk? Listen to them bills crackle and roll yo' best!"

He held the dice tight between the flat palms and breathed between his hands; then, rubbing his palms together, he rolled the dice back and forth.

"Now then, dice. Sweet dice, li'l dice. Roll fo' yo' daddy!"

He flung them upon the table.

"*Hah!* Little Jo!" he yelled. A three and a five turned up. Maddox had lost. He grinned good-naturedly.

"No luck," he remarked; and threw two new bills on the table. "You try 'em," he suggested to Bud.

Bud took the dice.

"How about a little game?" he asked.

"Little or big, it's all the same to me!" assented Wimble, and Messrs. Duncan Glezer and Will Snedeker made the party five. Bud got the dice on the first throw, and nonchalantly tossed a dollar bill onto the table.

"Fade you!" Wimble covered it. The others followed suit.

Bud threw a seven and raked in more money than he'd ever won in a gamble all his life.

"Four dollars!" he chuckled.

"Shucks!" said Maddox. "Leave it in." He produced a five-dollar bill. Mr. Duncan Glezer, who was not inclined to see the village outdone by a city man, was game. He did likewise.

"Sure," he said. "Make it a game for men!"

Whereupon it developed that, while Curt Wimble was a careful soul and would stay out of it, Will Snedeker

owned as his limit nothing lower than the sky, and emphatically came in.

Bud threw a five.

"Three to two," said Maddox immediately.

"What?" asked Bud.

"Three to two you don't make that five again," explained Maddox.

What could a man do? Bud put up his two.

"Come on five!" begged Bud. And the five came on.

"Wow!" cried Bud, raking in the money. "Eighteen dollars, and four; that's twenty-two dollars!"

Maddox winked at Mr. Curt Wimble.

"What you betting?" he asked the enthusiastic Bud.

"Two," declared Bud gallantly. Whereupon, Curt Wimble, intoxicated by that wink, decided to prove himself worthy of inclusion among the ranks of men who were of the world, and threw down a five-dollar bill.

"Here's five says you crap," he stated.

"Fade yer," assented Bud. And the others covered his two.

Bud decided that the circumstances demanded he approach the matter properly. So he wound up. He held the dice tightly in a clenched fist, and breathed upon that fist as though he feared imminent frostbite. Then he waved the fist temptingly above the table.

"Oh, baby!" he pleaded. "Come on Big *JO!*" He threw the dice from him. "Eight!" he cried. It was a prayer; but the dice turned up a one and a two. He was lost.

"Wow!" he remarked ruefully; and he grudgingly paid out his losses. "But I'm still to the good," he murmured.

"Sure!" cried Maddox heartily. "You're still to the good. A man with a head like yours can make his own dice if he has to."

In his turn he gathered up the dice, and agitated the hand which held them as though conjuring up a deity with it. As he waved his hand, he fixed Bud with a fascinating but far-seeing eye.

"Ooooooorl a matter uv chaaaaance!" he crooned in a nasal singsong. "You take your chance *and* you win or lose. John D. Rockefeller took his chance, and look at him now!" While he set forth this philosophy, he did not cease to agitate the hand which held the dice; removed it with the movement of a nigger minstrel with a pair of bones between his fingers. "Likewise Bill Hohenzollern; look at him. It's all in the little dice. Keep your eye on the little dice. Come on, gentlemen, what do you bet?" His laughing, irritating eyes were now on Bud Martin, now on Curt Wimble, fleetly dancing about the faces before him. He seemed to have fascinated the rural sportsmen with his eye and voice. They lounged silently about him and listened. He continued to wave his hand.

"I am about to roll the little dice. Let us see some decoration on the table. It is bare. It is ugly. A little decoration, gentlemen. . . . I prefer green but I like yellow. Come on, what are the bets?"

He now had his hearers worked up to a peculiar pitch.

They all felt that for the first time in their lives they were playing with a man who knew the meaning of play. They were bound to live up to this challenge, and yet they did so with the uneasy suspicion that he knew the game too well. Dunc Glezer threw down half a dollar.

"Hah, a rattle! The chink of money," grinned Snake.

"Chicken feed begins to fall where the starry-eyed eagle of the western ranges is about to eat. Come on, put up your money, put up your bets, gentlemen, the little dice are about to roll." Three more half dollars were deposited upon the baize. Snake Maddox then turned upon Bud Martin, and his voice was peremptory, authoritative.

"You've got lots of money, buddy," he said. "What you bet I don't throw Big Dick right out on to the table, first shot?"

Bud felt that he had no alternative.

"Two dollars," he said, and put the money down.

"Two dollars," Maddox agreed. "Now then, gentlemen, watch carefully. The little dice are about to roll."

He held his hand over the table, gave a flick of the wrist and sent the dice rolling forth upon the baize. "Uh, *HUH!* Ten come up!" he cried with tremendous feeling. But the dice made up a nine.

Maddox's face fell woefully. Martin laughed and picked up the money.

"Guess that'll hold you for awhile, buddy," he gloated.

"No luck," sighed Maddox. "You bit off more'n you could chew, that time, Jo," another pointed out.

"An' Bud swallowed it for him!" roared Dunc Glezer; which witticism was a great success. The local boys all

felt indeed that the victory of Bud Martin was a proof that, for all his big talk, the city man was just as dependent on the turn of the dice as they were. And Maddox, who could make the particular pair of dice he now played with perform any trick he desired, had designed to create just that effect.

"A dollar you don't throw a ten this time, either," offered Curt Wimble now.

"No side bets right now," refused Maddox sheepishly; and the boys felt that the city man was on his way.

"There's four dollars on the table," Snake again began his singsong. "Four dollars, and nine to go. Nine come up!" he cast the dice. Eight came up.

"One to the south!" murmured the player. "Come nine. Who bets me I won't throw a nine? Even betting, gentlemen." He put down a dollar bill and they all came in.

"Uh, *HUH!* Come nine!" and the dice made nine.

"No luck!" murmured Maddox, but with a new meaning. "Leave your money in; leave it in, gentlemen. I'm one against four. One against four." He placed four more bills upon the table, and threw a four.

"Four; little brother of Big Jo! Who says I don't throw that four?" He glanced swiftly about the circle. "Here's five dollars says I make that four. Who takes a two to one bet? Two to one?" He eyed Bud Martin directly. Snake Maddox knew that, among all the men present, Bud was particularly his meat.

Now Bud had been working for a month since school ended, and, being a big lad, he drew down a man's pay.

He had that man's pay in his pocket now; sixty-three dollars of it, and he responded to the challenge of the city sport with the facility of the winner. With an embarrassed pride, he laid a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"Anybody else?" demanded Snake. And Snedeker decided to be somebody else. His bill went down beside Bud's; but for the rest the stakes were too high. With far-seeing, elfish eyes, Snake rattled his dice. Then he cast them deftly on the table and they came up a three and a one. But he only picked up a single ten-dollar bill.

"Come on," he said. Who's out for real money? Who's staying in? Here's two dollars I keep the dice, and eight dollars I throw a seven."

Bud obediently covered the side bet. The others stayed in.

Snake grinned within himself, and threw a seven.

"Doggone!" growled Bud.

"No luck," grinned Snake. Again he cast, and threw a six. "Come on, now, are we playing a game, or knittin' socks? I shoot the works!"

They all came in, tempted by the size of the pot. And Snake again played on the sensitive Bud.

"What's it goin' to be?" he challenged that youth; and that youth, as Maddox well knew, was intoxicated now with the high play.

"Even money against that six," snapped Bud. He put down another ten.

"One li'l sawbuck!" remarked Snake, covering it. "Any more?"

The fact that there was emphatically not any more

should have warned Snake then, but he felt that he had this crowd accurately appraised as a bunch of yokels, and was playing them recklessly.

"Oh, li'l dice; sweet li'l dice, lemme see that six. Read 'em!" he cried, as he cast them on the baize. And they read six.

"Oh, boy!" gasped Bud, as Maddox raked in the money.

"A clean table, boys, a nice clean table," proclaimed Snake; and all unconsciously he was dropping all simulation of innocence, and becoming the suave and confident professional gambler before at least two men, who, having been overseas, had met that type before.

"How about a little old dollar bill on the first throw?" he suggested nonchalantly. And he suited the action to the word.

"Fade yer," said Wimble, but he spoke with a certain coldness. The others followed.

Snake threw an eight, followed it with a twelve, followed it with a three, and looked about for something better.

"I'm takin' even money on that eight," he announced; and placed a five-dollar bill on the table. Obediently, Bud covered him. Snake then threw a six, but he followed it with the eight, and left the money on the table.

"Ten dollars on the board," he smiled. "What'll we do with it?"

"Bet you crap," said Bud, feeling that his luck could not last. So the boy covered the ten, and watched

tensely while Snake cast the dice. He threw a seven and cleared the table once again.

"Tough luck, buddy," he confided to Martin.

Wimble leaned across the table.

"Let's see you roll them dice!" he said coldly. Maddox looked up. It was his first definite warning that all was not well.

"Roll 'em?" he asked with innocent puzzlement. "What am I doin'?"

"I mean roll 'em hard," said Wimble. "Let's see 'em run over the table."

Maddox summed up the situation in a flash. A bad loser.

"Don't whine, buddy," he smiled. "The kid here has lost more jack than you'll see in a month. Be a sport."

"All right," growled Wimble. "Only roll them."

Maddox for answer threw some money on the table, and saw it covered. He then threw and made a ten.

"Any bets?" he asked blithely; and unmistakably addressed Wimble. "Ain't finished, are you?" he asked, and put up a two-dollar bill.

"Yeh," said Wimble shortly. "I'm through."

Maddox looked about him.

"Betting, buddy?" he asked Martin. Recklessly, the boy pulled out his roll which was now pathetically slim.

"Don't do it, Bud," warned Wimble. "This guy's a pro!"

Snake Maddox then perceived that the game was over. He also perceived that he had made a mistake. These hicks had been holding out on him. They had let him be-

lieve them clothed with an innocence which was a snare and a delusion. They were wise, whereas he had thought them to be, from the neck upwards, more than dead. His breast swelled with honest indignation. That they should have deceived him like this was a dastardly and intolerable thing. But even while his righteous breast was swelling, Snake knew that here was a situation for tact and for finesse. The truth of Wimble's accusation must never be admitted. So he arose and faced his accuser.

"Where do you get that stuff?" he demanded with nobility and pride.

"Never mind where I get that stuff. I say you're a pro!" asserted Wimble.

"Oh, I suppose you know all about it? You played the game all your life, and should know." Maddox's tone was withering, but Wimble did not perceptibly wither.

"An' I suppose you never played the game at all before to-night?" he sneered.

"Yes," admitted Snake, with dignity. "I played the game but that don't say I'm a pro. You never seen it played before by a sportsman, that's all that's the matter with you."

"All right, if you ain't a pro, let's see them dice." His glance fell to the table, but the dice were long since in Snake's pocket.

"The hell I will," said Maddox amiably.

"Yes," asserted Wimble, "I guess you will."

"Who'll make me?" asked Maddox, looking for the door.

"Grab him, Dunc!" yelled Wimble, and advanced.

Snake Maddox thereupon turned, to find Duncan Glezer just behind him. He whipped up a fist at the chin of Mr. Glezer, but Mr. Glezer punched him, not playfully, in the ribs. It was Snake's first contact with strength derived from the soil, and he learned thereby that a youth who has just finished a season's haying has an arm of iron. As he went hurtling back from Duncan's pile-driver blow, Wimble caught him on the rebound, so to speak, and knocked him over three chairs and a stand of billiard cues, by a neat drive to the side of his jaw. Maddox knew then that his only hope lay in flight, and, having been flung right across the chairs which followed him to the floor, into the very threshold of the door, he took advantage of the fact that the chairs were between his enemies and his person, and dived for the open.

He had borrowed the gardener's flivver for this run into a life of sport, and he knew that the gardener's flivver was at the end of the navigable road some two hundred yards up the point. Fortunately, the son of the soil, whatever muscular strength he may achieve, seldom develops speed. Speed was one of the best things Snake possessed. And he used it. He had his engine started and his flivver under way, as Bud, the lightest and fastest of his pursuers, entered the second hundred yards of the chase.

"He's got my money!" bawled Bud Martin after him.

Snake heard that cry, and laughed bitterly. It was little compensation to him that, when he and the Great Corvan were asked to leave these parts, he could boast of having earned the car fare home.

CHAPTER XII

THE LONG ARM OF WADE

Corvan had taken Albert Trench and his son to the station and seen them on their way. He had again looked upon the happiness which it was in his power to create, and he had again experienced the terrible tribute of sincere and unaffected gratitude. It was terrible to him, because it was irresistible. It set at naught his reasonable soul which argued that, whatever the superficial means he could call upon to alleviate the sorrows of these people, he could never be one of them. He must put sentiment aside. He must struggle against this quicksand which was tugging at him.

And yet why should he struggle? Was not this place a better place than he had ever known? He could not forget a picture of a girl who sat framed in blossoming shrubbery and sewed. A girl who worked so that the burdens of others might be alleviated. There could be nothing soft, nothing unworthy, in an appreciation of that. While he appreciated it, he sat and listened to the grandfather's clock strike ten. He wondered dimly where Maddox was this evening. Maddox who had warned him of the quicksand. Corvan was beset by conflicting thoughts. He had never known confusion

in his life before; but now he was confused, and it alarmed him.

The last chime of the clock left a long silence behind it. And the silence was broken by a roar. It was the roar of an overworked engine, and swiftly, upon its sudden silence, Corvan heard the kitchen door open, and from the dining room Snake Maddox burst in upon him.

Corvan looked up in amazement. It was not the trim Maddox of the afternoon. His chin was cut and bleeding. His clothes were dirty, and in disarray. His collar, burst open at the throat, was stained with blood.

"Chief!" he blurted, as Corvan arose from his chair. "It's all up. We gotta breeze!"

Corvan gazed upon him with the old gaze of uncompromising appraisal.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Aw, I got into a little game!"

And Corvan understood. He turned squarely on the culprit and spoke in a dispassionate and icy voice.

"I thought I told you to lay off," he said.

"But I couldn't help it, chief. I tell yer I couldn't. They was rollin' the bones down here in this pool room, an' I just edges into the game. Of course I won. There was nothin' to it. An' there was a kid there who just threw his jack into my hands. I couldn't help that, could I?"

"Well?"

"Well, a big stiff who'd been in the army, smells a rat and calls for a show-down. I couldn't let him get

away with that, could I? So he gets rough, and plasters me a crack in the jaw, an'—"

"And what?"

"And I come home."

Corvan stood and looked at Maddox thoughtfully. Maddox didn't know that the man was struggling, as a field marshal must struggle on the verge of defeat, to conjure somehow, somewhere, a force which could save him from this ruin.

"You mean, that they know we're crooked?" he said at last.

"Sure!" admitted the Snake briefly.

"Well, we're not."

"Huh?"

"I say we're not. We haven't been crooked since eleven-ten A. M. this morning."

Snake Maddox looked puzzled.

"What happened then?" he queried.

"Harold Trench threw a fit."

"Aw, talk American."

"After he threw a fit, I helped him home and I've just come back from the station where I took Harold and his father to the train. They've gone to Michigan where the boy is going to be cured. I'm backing the cure."

"What's the lay?"

"The lay is that we're not crooked any more. You and I are now the hands of Providence who have come into this village to be of help to the needy."

Maddox gazed upon his chief with admiration and regret.

"Great stuff!" he pronounced. "And you had something big lined up. Gee, chief, I'm sorry if I spoiled it."

Corvan saw at once how Maddox had twisted his words to another meaning. But he did not disillusion him.

"You haven't spoiled it," he announced succinctly. "You're going to dig out the money you took from that kid to-night and give it back to him."

"Aw, chief—"

"Sure."

"Cripes! But I can't do that. Where d'yer think I'd get my line?"

"You can get your line anywhere you like. That doesn't matter. As far as this village is concerned, we're white as driven snow. So you hop off to this kid's house in the morning, and eat dirt. See?"

Maddox looked upon his chief with smoldering eyes.

"I see," he said. "I see that you're playin' the hicks for a fare-ye-well, and I'm goin' to be the goat. All right. What do I get out of it?"

"A good reputation."

"I mean in the rake off."

"I can't tell you that!"

"You mean I go blind?"

"You go blind."

"All right. You go to hell. Any time I go blind into a game where I'm the goat, you can look all over the house and find me absent."

Corvan did not relax the gaze which held Snake Maddox in spite of his snarling resentment.

"Think it over." The even voice spoke fatefully, and Maddox again experienced that helplessness to disobey this master.

"Yeah!" he burst forth desperately. "With a bunch of hicks that was made in a steel mill ramblin' up the point to pick over the corpse. I'd look pretty thinkin' it over when they got through with me, wouldn't I?" There was almost a sob in his voice.

"I'll fix that to-morrow. Do as I say."

Desperately the Snake decided to make a break from that commanding voice, from those uncompromising eyes.

"Fix it alone!" he cried. "I'm blowin'."

He made for the door, but with two strides Corvan headed him off.

"Hold on!" snapped Corvan, and Maddox, cringing, snarled back.

"Hold nothin'!" he cried. "I'm on my way!"

He would have pushed Corvan aside and Corvan, seeing the ground give way beneath a castle that might have been built on quicksand, would have resisted; but a knock sounded at the door.

The two men stood silent for a moment.

"It's them! Don't let 'em in!" cried Maddox and reached for his hip.

Corvan snatched at the reaching arm, holding it fast.

"No gun play!" he snapped. . . . "Get out of the room. I'll go.

As Maddox dissappeared Corvan threw the front door wide. On the porch stood a thin young man

whose flashily clad figure instantly offended Corvan with a sense of its unfitness.

"What do you want?" he asked.

The visitor flashed a shifting glance upon everything before him but Corvan's eyes.

"I'm from Wade," he said.

And Corvan with a shock felt his spirit rebel as he gazed on the thin degenerate countenance of Wade's mouthpiece, Beetle Brower. Fantastically it seemed to him as if his iron-visaged partner had been able to probe his mind. To read there the doubts which had afflicted him. To see the threatening quicksand. As this sickly instrument had so often been the forerunner of the evil which Wade planned, it seemed that now he was sent like the long arm of Wade to drag Corvan back from harm. He allowed the man to come inside.

"What do you want down here, Beetle?" he demanded.

Brower's eyes shifted about the room furtively.

"Can anybody hear?" he whispered, huskily.

"No. They're all in bed. Go on."

Brower drew closer, ignoring Corvan's contemptuous regard.

"It's a new graft," he said.

The words invoked in Corvan an unreasonable disgust. He was listening to the language of his kind, and it was a strange language.

"Go on," he repeated.

"Wade sent me down. To plant a block of stock. You know." He leered slyly.

Corvan nodded.

"It's the Turnstile Stores, Inc. Capitalized for two hundred thousand in the State of Delaware. Warehouses in Hoboken, and to run a chain of stores all over the south. Wade's got the shares all under his control, see, and he's placed orders with five bona-fide brokers for all the shares they can get him at ten dollars a share."

Corvan grinned without smiling. It had a familiar sound.

"Have they got any for him?"

"Sure. They picked up fifty shares off a poor boob over in Brooklyn who didn't know the value of 'em. That was me. And they got two hundred off a widow woman in the Bronx. That was—"

Maddox entered the room, and Brower shut up with a start, as though shocked by lightning. "That was May Delaney," he finished, recognizing the intruder.

"I get you. Who's the sucker?"

"An old boy who lives out in Westchester named Queritt—Bradley Queritt. Wade got hep to him when he started buying oil stocks. He warned him against that, and offered to look for some gilt-edge investment for him. Then he fixed up this Turnstile Stores proposition, and went to the old boy with the news that there was a market for blocks of the stock at ten dollars a share, and that he thought he could pick up a lot of it cheap. The old boy wanted to be shown about the market, so Wade buys these shares off me at six and May Delaney at five, and then sells 'em to himself

through these brokers at ten, so the old boy's satisfied. See?"

"I see. And you plant the rest with me?"

"Sure. Wade tells this Queritt guy that he knows a retired gent who owns 10,000 shares. This guy lives on an old estate, and he's a wise guy. It'll be hard to get him to sell his controlling interest in this company, but Wade thinks he can do it. All that bunk, 'All right,' says the old boy, 'let's get after him.' So you're the retired gent, and here's your stock."

With which words Brower plunged his hand into his breast and drew forth a bulky package of crisp stock certificates.

"You want to be all hipped to treat this baby right when he comes down to pick up the gilt-edge investment," he said. He winked, but catching Corvan's eye was at once all seriousness. Corvan disengaged the papers from the heavy envelope that held them. He was thinking of the moment on the veranda, of a morning full of adventure in humanity. But this thing was stronger than the pull of the sentimental. It was life itself. His life, and Wade's. This was the game.

And yet she had looked very beautiful, framed in the blossoming vines.

"Oh, boy!" murmured Maddox. "And he pays how much?"

"Seventy-five."

"Seventy-five times ten," figured Maddox. Seventy-five thousand simoleons! Chief, you're right! I'm givin' back that chicken feed in the morning."

"Fine!" said Corvan. And without enthusiasm, without perceptible interest, he took the certificates in his hand and counted them.

"You give back that chicken feed in the morning."

His eyes were fixed upon a point far off. Flanked by these two underworld creatures he stood motionless—thinking. She had been beautiful—clean; that was it. As clean as a flower, yet vigorous with life. They had done a good morning's business together.

"Any message for Wade?" Brower's words crashed in upon his mind.

Wade! The voice of an unalterable past—an unavoidable destiny. He was here to play a bunco game with Wade. He winced. The thought of Wade, touching the thought of her, was displeasing, contaminating. And yet he knew that Wade was akin to himself—a part of him. Wade was that side of the Great Corvan which did the hard driving and unclean things of the trade.

"Wade will ask me," pressed Brower.

"Yes," answered Corvan. "Tell him I'll expect to get all the details by mail or 'phone."

While Maddox ushered his fellow henchman to a waiting taxi, Corvan stood fingering the stock, striving to drive from his conscious mind the haunting visions of the day. He counted the certificates over, and lost all count.

"Wade will ask me," he repeated to himself; and he knew that Wade would ask; and Wade would demand and expect as his right. . . . Implicit loyalty

to the game . . . unwavering duplicity until the swindle was seen through.

Through the voice of Brower, Wade had spoken. By rapid transit he had stretched forth his arm. Corvan must continue great in his world of graft even though he must scheme and swindle with brightest womanhood at his elbow.

CHAPTER XIII

MADDOX EATS DIRT

Snake Maddox stood on the porch of the Martin home, which was a weather-beaten frame house on the shore road. He had come to return to Bud Martin the money he had so deplorably separated him from the night before.

This, it might be presumed, was a delicate matter, to be approached with humiliation and a palpitating heart. But to Snake Maddox it amounted merely to a necessity. As far as he was concerned, pride served the game. As the goat in a blind deal, he would eat dirt for nobody; as an important unit in a big game, he would blithely dismiss the affair as a slight unpleasantness.

The kitchen door was open, but no one observed his presence, so Snake Maddox stamped loudly on the boards. A girl came to the door. She was a diminutive girl in a blue cotton dress, but her brown eyes crackled an ominous indication of unplumbed depths.

"It'll stay down all right if you leave it alone," she said.

"What will?" he asked, betraying the surprise of unsophisticated youth.

"The porch floor."

"Well, the door was open, so I couldn't knock on that."

"You could have walked in."

"Sure, but I didn't like to."

"What are you selling?"

"Nothing."

"Well, we don't want to buy it."

"All right, then I'll give it to you," he grinned elfishly. He felt that he sort of liked this girl.

"Where's Bud?" he asked.

"Out to work. He'll be back to lunch in a while, though. Anything I can do?"

Snake Maddox thanked his stars. His line would go much easier with her, and anyway a woman could be depended upon to pass the word around. After leaving the money with this girl, it would not be long ere the entire village knew of his penitence.

"Sure," he said. "You can do a lot for me if you will."

"We don't want any insurance; we've got more lightning rods than furniture; and we've got enough books to read until the next mail-order catalogue comes out."

"That's fine. I came on. . . ." His expression changed as only he knew how to change it, into a mask of infinite gravity. "It's—it's about— Can I come inside?"

She was immediately sympathetic.

"Of course!" she cried; and led him through the kitchen into the sort of living room he had seen in pictures. A room furnished with articles that were each a unit in the making of a home. After this, when

he remembered Sally Martin, he would remember at the same time that living room. She left him there for a moment to gaze upon the homely, and often ugly, things which he divined were inseparable from this house and the people of it. Then, after mysterious activities among pots and pans, she rejoined him.

"It's about last night," he began.

A shadow passed over her face.

"You've come to see Bud . . . about last night?"

"Yes. I guess I sort of slipped. We played a little game of crap—dice, you know."

She frowned.

"Are you the man who's up at the Humphrey place with that Mr. Corvan?" she asked ominously.

"Yeah, that's it. An' we got in a little game—"

"You mean you deliberately led him on. You got *him* into that game, and you *cheated* him! Oh, how could you?" She was standing beside a shining and knobbly table, and her head hardly rose above the oil lamp that stood upon it; yet the fire of her indignation filled the room. He met it with meticulous penitence. There was grievous anguish in his eyes.

"Yeah, that's it. I don't know how I come to do it. An' I'm sorry," he murmured. "An' I come here this morning to tell you that. I want to give Bud back that money that I took; I want to give it to him . . . an' say I'm sorry."

He took the roll of bills with silver enclosed in them from his pocket and held it out toward her. She stood

and looked at him, trying to read his woeful countenance.

"Give it back?" She was at a loss. "But why?"

"Take it," he pressed her; but she drew back. So he placed the money on the table. "I got to leave it here. I got to let him have it. An' I'm sorry. That's what I come here to say." There was something of the artist about Maddox. Not too many words, not too suave a period. The plaintive repetition touched his penitence with truth. "I guess that's all," he said, and made as if to go. But he artfully chose a door which he knew was not the one. And she, of course, said the expected.

"But hadn't you better stay and see Bud?" she asked.

He considered this.

"I suppose it would be best," he said, regarding her with a tortuous frown. "I wouldn't want it to look like I was sneaking out. He wouldn't like that."

She hastened to reassure him.

"No, it isn't that. Bud will be glad you did this. It was a pretty bad loss for Bud, and then he thought you had cheated him, too. But he wouldn't think you sneaked out."

"No, not him; I was speaking about Mr. Corvan. Mr. Corvan has been real good to me, and he wouldn't like to have it look like I went off without seeing your brother."

She frowned again.

"Was it Mr. Corvan sent you down here to do this?"

she asked. It was precisely what the artful Snake had angled for.

"Well, in a sort of way," he explained. "It's like this." He paused a moment to let his tortuous frown get in its work. "You see I never had much chance when I was a kid. Ever hear of Cherry Street?" She hadn't. "Well, that's where I was brought up," he lied. "The toughest block in the hardest neighborhood in the New York slums, see? The cops work in doubles on Cherry Street. So I didn't have much chance. Well, then there was the War, an' I went into the navy. An' that didn't help me neither. That's where I learnt to play crap like I did last night. I know I didn't ought to."

His gaze caught by the earnest brown eyes before him, he paused for a moment and lost his treasured frown. "Gee, she's a peach!" was his thought.

"And did you get in bad company?" she asked with sincerest sympathy.

Again, but rather suddenly, he wrung his brows with penitence.

"Sure," he said quickly. "The navy was tough. Well, then, I come back to New York, see? And I didn't have no home, nor no people, nor anything; and things looked bad, an' I thought that I could use this trick I'd got with the dice to make my living out of, see?" She saw, with a becoming shadow of aversion that puckered her smooth forehead. "So that's how I met Mr. Corvan."

"Playing dice?" she cried.

"That's *when* I met him," he amended. "He had an office, and they needed an office boy. I got the job, but he caught me rollin' a game out in the hall." He reflected that this was going along pretty good. He was proud in his heart, but she saw only humility upon his face.

"But he's white!" Maddox cried with some heat. "He's the real goods. Did he fire me? No! He just sat me down at his desk and chinned to me. Just like I was his kid brother. That's how he was!"

He put so much warmth into his voice that he surprised himself. To his amazement he saw the brown eyes before him fill with quick tears, and she smiled radiantly behind them.

"How fine!" she murmured. "How grand!"

"Sure," he assented doubtfully. "It was grand. 'An' he took me right with him after that. I guess there ain't anybody else in the world as close to him as me. 'An' he trusts me, too." There seemed to be quite an honest ring in the Snake's voice now. An earnestness which he himself could not account for. "An' then like a low-down cur I go an' spill the beans last night!" he cried.

"I mean fall off. Slip into that game. Gee, he was as hard hit by that as if I'd picked his pocket. He spoke to me about it, an' I was sorry. I was, honest." And Maddox honestly was. It had nearly spoiled a deal. "I was sorry. 'And so I come down here to tell your brother that, an' give him back the coin. See?"

"I see," she said; and even the wily Maddox didn't

know what he had done. He had brought to a girl a man to be reformed; a man in the process of reformation. "I see," she said; and poor Maddox could not know his danger.

"I think Mr. Corvan is just the finest man I ever heard of!" she exclaimed. "Why, he's just making a new man of you! He's just saving you."

Maddox saw his cue and took it. He turned to the window and gazed moodily forth across the meadows.

"Sure," he uttered thickly. "An' I go playing him dirt like this. Ruining his reputation among you folks by my gutter work like that. I guess I'd better drift back to Cherry Street. I don't belong with such folks as him."

She came instantly to his side.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "No, Mr. Maddox! No, you're wrong, you're wrong! You must stick by him now! You must always stick by him. He's a good man, and you must show him that you know it!"

He turned resolutely toward the door. The real door this time.

"You don't understand," he said. "An' I guess I've been pretty foolish to say all this to you. But I guess I'd better go."

"But I do!" she insisted. "And you've been fine to tell me. It was noble of you! It really was. Oh, you must stay by Mr. Corvan now!"

He shook his head.

"You're real good!" he said.

"Just the man I'm looking for!" boomed the manly

voice of Bud Martin from the doorway. "So you thought you'd come and play a little game at home, huh?"

He blocked the doorway ominously, and Maddox played his part with the technique of an artist. In noble, but penitent, humility he stood before his accuser.

"I know," he murmured humbly. "I done wrong."

"Oh, Bud!" cried Sally then. "Tell him not to go! Tell him to stay and stick to Mr. Corvan to the last!"

But the ominous countenance of Bud did not relax until the wily Maddox stepped forward to press the roll of bills into his hand.

"I know how you feel, Buddy," was his presentation speech. "And you're right. Here's the money I took orf you last night and I want to say I'm sorry. I can't do better than that, can I?" These words which he had found an ever ready help in time of trouble, backed up by the unquestionable authority of the ready cash, did their work. Amid a shower of unheeded explanations from his diminutive sister, Bud Martin counted his losses of the night before, and saw them made good.

"What've we got for dinner?" was his next remark. That reminded Sally of her kitchen, and Maddox of the fact that he was hungry.

"I'll go," he said. But Sally had no intention of losing the penitent thus easily, and he did not go. The proprieties were later adjusted by the appearance of quite the ugliest spinster of uncertain years whom Maddox had ever seen, and she, on being introduced as Millie, eldest sister and head of the house of Martin, proved to be the best-natured soul whom

Maddox had ever heard hold forth. After further explanations of the Snake's presence, table talk was continued in the capable hands of Sally, and it consisted almost exclusively of Sally's determination to prove that Millie was the finest cook in the township, and Millie's blushing refutation of that honor. Sally finally brought forth proof of her claim in the form of a fruit cake baked by the candidate, and Maddox awarded the argument to Sally without further debate.

As he walked homeward Maddox considered various aspects of the morning.

"A peach," he reflected. "And she only talked to give somebody a boost. And she talked all the time. . . . And she didn't ever mention Sally Martin. . . . A peach!"

Blithely he had dismissed his mission of the morning. The incongruity of the occasion which had brought him to that home did not occur to him. If it had arisen in his mind he would have had no misgivings for it. He would have called it blessed.

CHAPTER XIV

OF VARIOUS NEEDS

Corvan sat at the wheel of his big machine and looked out over the sea. The great car stood incongruously upon the summit of a dune under a cedar tree, gnarled into twisted distortion by the winds. He was miles from East Harbor, and in that long drive the savage mood that had caused him to press his car along the sandy trails of the shore had borne him company. His mind, so long used to scheming and cool cunning, was aflame with conflict. He must be alone; away from the trodden roads; alone with the sea and sands. . . . He had forced his motor to fight the giving aclivity of this eminence, as a hunter puts his mount at insuperable obstacles, and the intensity of the effort, the quick, desperate manipulation of the over-ridden gears had brought him peace.

Sitting there, relaxed at the wheel, with the clear panorama of the sea and shore below him, and the murmurous noises of the water in his ears, he felt sure of himself again.

There was business afoot, and he knew what was expected of him. What, in a game for big stakes, only he, the Great Corvan, could achieve. He must fix his mind upon it. He must lay out a perfect stage

setting for the important scene of the dénouement. This he would do with that expert feeling for details which stamped the work of Corvan with the smoothness of perfection. The victims of Wade and Corvan found it hard to believe they had been swindled, even in the face of their devastated fortunes. This man Queritt, reflected Corvan, would not believe it. Not after the Great Corvan had finished with him.

He must write to Wade and give him the perfect lay. Wade and he must work in absolute harmony. He remembered the protest that had arisen within him when Brower had appeared. Well, Wade should have sent some one else. Brower was a snow-bird and a dip. Corvan could not endure contact with such scum.

Yet there had been another influence working upon him that night. Margaret Fiske. . . . The memory of the morning returned. . . . In his mind he vizualized it. . . . The stricken boy and that straightforward, unselfish dash she had made to succor him. . . . The sunlight which had pierced the blossoms of her veranda. . . .

With the sea murmuring before him he saw it all in his mind. And he smiled. A grim, regretful smile it was, for he was thinking that that morning of sunlit sentiment and the girl herself must be forgotten; put out of his mind and life.

There was no other way. It was fatuous and wild idiocy to deny it. He had been taken off guard. He must forget it.

. . . . . .

As he drove back through the village he overtook her. He was passing the neat white fence that inclosed the meetinghouse and the field beside it. Margaret Fiske, trim and fresh in crisp gingham, was walking on the pathway. He could not pass her by.

"How's the darned old tablecloth?" he asked pleasantly, as he stopped the car.

"Don't speak lightly of holey things," she replied.

With instinctive courtesy he stepped from the machine. She smiled with genuine pleasure at his appearance. Clad in well-made flannels and tennis shirt, he was to her a being in another world. He was young and strong with a slim elegance not like the strength of the countryside.

"I'm glad to see you," she said. "I've been talking about you." Her smile was very frank.

"I must get away from her!" A small voice of warning spoke within his mind. "I must keep away." He felt that his presence contaminated her. And it led nowhere—so could come to nothing.

"Whatever you said," he remarked aloud, "I'll bet I don't deserve it. Can I give you a lift?"

"Yes, if you will. But listen first.

"I'm listening."

"They got a fund together down here to build a war memorial." He smiled. "Don't laugh," she warned quickly. He was serious again. "It's for the village dead."

"Of course." Subtly he felt the tug of the quick-

sand. It was a warning. He felt a wild impulse to leap in his car and furiously drive away.

"Of course," was all he could say, and he gazed into her clear, frank face intently.

"But they've never put it up."

"Why?"

"Because everybody has their own opinion of where it ought to go, and for three years now they've quarreled over it. They are all suspicious of one another—and jealous."

A glint of unpleasant understanding crept into Corvan's eyes. He had founded many a good graft upon such a situation as she was describing.

"I know," he said.

"But it's terrible! It is for the dead, and we owe them that much!"

Again he felt the demand which the selflessness of this girl had imposed upon him the day he met her; and conscious of his danger he helplessly responded to it.

"What can I do?" he asked her.

"They had a meeting of the committee last night and I got dad to persuade them that the fund should be placed in the hands of a disinterested person to select a site and erect the memorial. They didn't like it at first but I told them about what you had done for the Trenches, and that your business is organizing things, so they decided to ask you to do it."

Corvan's heart sank low. He had been going to dismiss from his mind this girl and the compelling touch she gave him with humanity. This new demand, he

knew, was not the road to forgetfulness, and yet he could not deny her. He knew that he would not deny her.

She saw in his eyes the sinking of his heart, and a certain realization appalled her.

"Have I done too much?" she murmured, confused. "Oh, I should have asked you first! You're angry!"

He reviled himself for having rebuffed her.

"No, no," he assured her hurriedly. "No, but it takes a moment to adjust oneself, you know. I've never erected a memorial."

He smiled. How ridiculously helpless he was.

"I'm going to do it," he said.

"But I'm forcing you. Oh, how foolish I was! I might have seen that this would force you. Please don't do it if you haven't time."

He rallied all his forces to reassure her.

"Listen to me," he said, assuming a humor which belied his agitation. "I have nothing whatever to do. Nothing better, anyway. How do I go about it?"

"You're sure?"

"Sure. Get into the car, and I'll take you home."

As he traversed the scented road with Margaret at his elbow, he knew again the torture of mental conflict.

"Mrs. Humphrey—Mrs. Lionel Humphrey—is chairman of the committee," she was saying. "She will come and turn the business over to you."

But he was striving mightily to put from his mind a persistent, dominating figure. Wade! the driving power of craft and scheming. Wade! who was in a sense

Corvan's other self. A hard domineering self. A personality which regarded the devious charlatanry of his life as a proof of strength, of superiority over the herd.

A sunlit, pure thing. At his elbow, with her clean, youthful body touching him, she spoke to him of other things; of the village people and their life.

He felt the contact of her purity and it made riot in his mind. He must forget. But Wade, he decided, was the thing to put away. Wade, and the cunning of his craft. These he must forget.

Yet Wade could not be dismissed, and as Corvan drove with the girl at his side, Wade was nearer than she; closer to him than she. Wade was a part of Corvan himself.

He stopped his car at her gateway and she stepped out.

"You're sure you want to do it?" she asked timidly.

He was beside her at the gate.

"Yes," he said. "I want to do it."

His eyes wandered over the farmhouse behind her. It was dilapidated behind the screening vines, and it bore many evidences of the attrition which its overworked occupants were powerless to stay.

She caught the object of his gaze.

"It's a fine old house," he remarked lamely.

She flushed.

"It's a relic," she said, "that our family built. Father dreamed of keeping the kind of home his fathers had. But . . . it looks like failure." She turned to the

rambling gray house. He looked into her face. There was love for her home and also regret in it.

"Was he too ambitious?" he asked her.

"No," she flashed forth in defence. "It's new methods. Farming is a business now, and labor. He needs men. He's making himself old with work!"

Corvan saw, in a field behind the house, the bent figure of a man. A man who worked his fields ceaselessly while his home rotted; and Corvan remembered the debt which threatened to take home and fields away. Labor was his only chance of escape. It occurred to Corvan that he could not offer this man money. But Fiske needed men.

"I must get in." She turned directly to him. "There's work to do."

"All right," he responded, following her through the gate, "and mind you have a good lunch ready for me. Work makes a man hungry."

She stared at him, astonished.

"I'm going to get a job with your father," he said.

As he left her on the porch to turn off into the fields, he was rewarded with a smile that dawned slowly upon her face.

He looked back to see her disappear into the house. And as he saw her go, there was an unvoiced cry that resounded in his heart.

"I need you!" it cried.

Corvan felt that all this was unreasonable and absurd. But he could not silence that cry.

CHAPTER XV

A QUEER FISH

When the delectable team of Wade and Corvan bestowed upon their victims the generic term of "sucker" they did themselves an injustice. The side-show charlatan of the country fair might fairly use the term for his victims because they were easily snared. But when you undertake to separate from the sum of seventy thousand dollars a man who has earned by his business ability several times more than that, you undertake to snare a different species of fish. It demanded as fine a skill for Wade to land Bradley Queritt, the chosen victim of Turnstile Stores, Inc., as it required to land a tarpon, and there was a distinct element of danger.

Queritt had made a fortune in the manufacture of marine hardware, and he was a perfect gentleman. He was perfect to the point of being picturesque. He was a man of sixty; a slight, wiry little man; and his dress was that of an assured position. It was quiet to the point of drabness, but it was good. His address matched his clothing, and his straightforward gray eyes alone were bright as jewels.

"In a long experience on the street, Mr. Queritt," said Wade, "I have never struck such an opportunity before." He spoke slowly with a hard measured voice. "It's out

of the ordinary—and we've got to handle it with gloves on."

"Yes," answered Queritt. "But it won't weaken our position to have a talk with Mr. Corvan."

He had come to Wade's office, a fact significant of the stage to which Wade had brought this new enterprise; and now sat erect in the straight-backed chair which he had chosen in preference to Wade's leather upholstery.

At his desk sat Wade, inscrutable, crafty, hard as granite. He was instinct with a driving power to contend with any odds for a fortune. Conscious of the machine which he controlled, of the many human tools which lay in dark places ready for his using, he played with Queritt as a chess player moves his king across a well-contested board with an alert mind for the skillful manipulation of his pawns.

"Of course," he agreed, "we will have a conference with Mr. Corvan. But all in good time, Mr. Queritt."

"And why isn't now a good time?"

"Because of the peculiar circumstances. You must remember that Mr. Corvan has not thought of selling. We must create a desire in him to sell this stock."

"You think he might suspect its true value?"

Wade turned inscrutably upon his victim. He didn't like the little man's bright glances. Queritt sometimes seemed too wise.

"Exactly!" he said frankly. "Put yourself in my shoes. In checking up the stockholders of the Turnstile Stores, I find that a certain Mr. Corvan holds the

majority of the stock. Also, I discover that that stock is worth twice what this Mr. Corvan paid for it. As you know, it is to my advantage that my clients make money. It is my pleasure and my profession to keep them posted. You are my client, I keep you posted. If you can buy this stock for seventy on the hundred, you will make a profit, and Corvan will make a profit. But it is obvious that he must not know the true value of that stock."

"Or only he will make the money, eh?" Queritt chuckled.

"Precisely. My gain comes from yours." He indulged in a meaning smile. "You see, it is a delicate matter to approach him under these circumstances."

"What have you done about it?"

"I wrote and informed him that I am in touch with a gentleman who desires to obtain a block of Turnstile Stores, and who is willing to pay a good price for it."

"Did he answer it?"

"It was to discuss his answer that I asked you to come here to-day, Mr. Queritt."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He is not interested in selling."

"Hump!"

"Exactly."

"What did you do then?"

"Sent him this letter." Wade passed the carbon copy of a letter across the table. "You see I have

hinted that he could make a fat profit out of the deal," he said. "It all takes time."

He watched Queritt while he read, as a tiger watches his prey, coldly, intently.

Having scanned the carbon copy, Queritt passed it back.

"But what about our market?" he snapped. "You say it's only a spurt for control. If the people behind that spurt find out where the stock is, where will we be then?"

Wade frowned.

"Leave that to me," he said.

It is notable that Wade had by this time achieved the most difficult stage of the successful confidence game. That is, the molding of the victim's mental attitude into the initial mind. Queritt was no longer being led toward a deeper interest in this scheme. He believed he was directing the game himself. Wade would now curb and control him rather than urge him on.

Queritt puffed nervously at his cigar. With his bright eyes fixed upon the inscrutable face before him, he drummed with his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair. Bradley Queritt was about to come to a decision.

"You're wrong," he said suddenly. Wade turned upon him.

"Huh?"

"I say you're wrong. You tell Mr. Corvan to come up and see you. Then we'll get together and close the deal."

Wade frowned.

"But, my dear Mr. Queritt," he said, and with a bland smile he leaned forward over the desk, "Mr. Corvan never comes up to the city. He has all the money he wants, and he lives at the old family country seat down on Long Island. I've been looking him up and I know my man. He only comes up to town in the opera season, and seldom does any business then. He leaves all that to his secretary. My whole trouble is that Mr. Corvan doesn't care whether he picks up a few thousand more or less, or not. He's one of the old country aristocracy. You know." With his cigar he waved an appropriate gesture.

"Call him up now, and ask him," proposed Queritt shortly.

Now Wade's plans did not include a meeting between Queritt and Corvan. Not yet. He and Corvan had no understanding to prepare them for such an eventuality. Moreover, Corvan in the city would not have a fraction of the prestige which Corvan in the setting of his quiet elegance at East Harbor would possess. The victim must be played until he accompanied Wade eagerly to that well-chosen lair and, withWade, eagerly sought to overcome the objections which Corvan, at his greatest in such a moment, would artfully place between him and the desirable purchase. Until then Corvan and Queritt must not meet.

Yet Queritt must not suspect it; and he was perilously close to Wade in this moment. He was watching the face of Corvan's partner alertly, intently. Cornered, aware

that to arouse suspicion would be fatal, Wade still commanded the situation. Boldness was the right play now, and Wade was bold. He seized the telephone.

"Get me Mr. Corvan—C-o-r-v-a-n, Corvan, at East Harbor, Long Island," he snapped.

Perhaps it was a mistake for Wade to drop his voice with those last words; perhaps it was inevitable that the alert mind of Bradley Queritt should take advantage of them. However that may be, as Wade hung up the receiver and turned from the telephone, the words still rang in Queritt's inner ear.

"I'll have him on the wire in a minute," Wade assured him, "and we'll see what persuasion will do."

"Fine," said Queritt, but in his mind was working the subtle voice which makes the phonographic record that is memory.

"East Harbor, Long Island," twinkled the voice in Queritt's mind. "Mr. Corvan of East Harbor, Long Island."

The telephone bell rang.

"There he is," said Wade. He shot a cold, scrutinizing glance at the shrewd old gentleman, and picked up the receiver. "Hello!"

Then Bradley Queritt saw a peculiar thing occur upon the face of the confidence man. Wade did not exactly lose countenance, but it was as though a cloud passing across the sun had thrown its shadow over a granite rock. And so fleetly as to come and go before the mind could well record it, a gleam of unearthly ferocity flashed in the man's eyes.

"Who? Grimshaw? Good God. I can't talk with you now!" said Wade into the telephone. And he said it with such remarkable softness that the difficulty of hearing his voice caused the words to sound with a peculiar emphasis. And then the moment was past. Wade was working the telephone with violent impatience.

"No, I didn't want to speak with him. With anybody! Get me Mr. Corvan!" he cried.

Queritt wondered why all these tiny scraps of sound seemed memorable to him.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO VOICES

In one corner of the large living room of Corvan's hired estate was an alcove lined with books, and furnished with a heavy oak writing table and a few chairs. Corvan had made this his office to the extent of reading his mail at the writing table, and talking over with Maddox such affairs of their business as he could not avoid discussing. But he generally avoided it. For a reason, which he postponed debating with himself, the discussion of business—the very nature of his business—became more distasteful to him as he became a more familiar figure in the life of the simple community which was East Harbor.

At present, for instance, with breakfast behind them, Corvan smoked his cigarette in the alcove and reminded Maddox that for a month he was on vacation.

"Wade will develop the game," he protested. "We can begin to worry when he's got the sucker ready."

"But we'll rot before then!" wailed Maddox. "Ain't there nothing a feller can do to keep his hand in?"

"Study nature," suggested Corvan. "The birds, the beasts, the flowers."

"Aw. . . ." Snake's voice was replete with pathos. "I mean a little graft. Why couldn't we work something

down here with a show-down that'll hold over till after this big graft is pulled? Once we put this stock play over, we can breeze. Then we should worry about the rep we leave behind."

"We should," murmured Corvan.

"They say those two old dames down at the post office—name of Spately—is up against it. They're talkin' of selling out the old place and openin' a hash house over at Brookhampton. Ain't there nothin' we could work there?"

Corvan contemplated this remark through smoke.

"Miss Fiske was speaking to me about it," he said. "She tells me they have some fine period furniture in that old home. I'm writing to some auctioneers. We can arrange an auction and let a few collectors know."

Maddox looked at him suspiciously.

"Where's the graft in that?" he inquired.

"We could run up the bids and make the two ladies some money."

"But us? Where do we come in?"

Corvan shot a direct, uncompromising glance at the younger man.

"We don't come in," he said slowly.

Again Maddox felt unreasonable awe of this man. It made him cringe and yet rebel.

"What's *eatin'* you? "he cried, distracted.

"Mrs. Lionel Humphrey is outside, Mr. Corvan, and she wants to talk with you." Mrs. Bland imbued her announcement with a quaint formality.

The two men walked into the living room to greet their visitor.

The third Mrs. Lionel Humphrey was tall and large-boned. Her gaunt face seemed at first sight extraordinarily devoid of feeling, or of any of the finer emotions. In her good brown suit she might have been the very embodiment of the Puritan ancestress of all the village.

Corvan drew up a chair and seated the lady with the fine courtesy that distinguished him.

"It's very good of you to call on us, Mrs. Humphrey," he said. "Although it's a delightful afternoon to get about in."

Watching the third Mrs. Humphrey, Corvan detected a shade of disappointment, of doubt, which dimmed her hard, dauntless eyes at the sound of his words.

"I guess I'm not very used to light talking," she announced in a rich baritone. "I came to you on some business that's pretty serious to us down here."

Once more Corvan was visited with that sense of smallness which set him to question himself. These country people had an air of reality; a certain quality which made them what he had thought the people of his experience might be if all pretence and sham were stripped from them. The third Mrs. Humphrey, he had gathered, was not liked by her neighbors. She was considered cold and unfeeling. Yet, like them, she won Corvan by her essential genuineness.

"You've come about the war memorial." His smile and his knowledge of her mission reassured her.

"They told me—" She broke off, apparently reflecting that this approach lacked the business touch. "Margaret Fiske told us—the committee, you know—that you would be willing."

"Miss Fiske has told me of the—er—differences which have held you up." Corvan's interruption was insinuated smoothly. The lady hardly appreciated that she had been interrupted.

"Well, the question is, will you do it? I've got one thousand seven hundred dollars to hand over to you if you will."

Having thus stated her business, the third Mrs. Humphrey met the eyes of the slickest confidence man in the game with the same dauntless gaze with which she had fixed him since her entrance.

And Corvan had to command himself to return it. She was asking him to take it. One thousand seven hundred dollars. A pitiful sum, yet, in times gone by, grist to the mill.

He caught the eyes of Maddox grimacing in his chair behind the earnest woman. Maddox wanted him to accept that miserable fund. Wade would desire it likewise! Wade! Corvan grinned within himself. If Wade could sit where Maddox was! If that hard souled spirit of subtle crime could watch him as he dabbled in the quicksands!

"But if I take this fund," he protested, "wouldn't it arouse ill feeling?"

Her eyes clouded again.

"Now that's just what I've been afraid of." She

leaned forward a little, and he noticed that she clasped her hands with a peculiar, wringing movement in her lap. "Mr. Corvan," she said, "I'm not one of those who had sons to send to the War, and whether I would have sent them willingly or not, I can't know, can I? But I know women who lost their young ones like you know your own mother, and I've known the young ones, too—nursed them when they was sick in their boyhood, and fed them out of my cooky jar. If I feel that way, you can just imagine what the mothers feel about this bit of rock with a brass plate on it. It's probably a little, trashy thing to you, but it's our war memorial for the boys who didn't come home, and we want you to help us with it."

Then Corvan knew that this gaunt woman, notable for the coldness of her demeanor, was a tired, disappointed soul. He divined that in a tribute to the dead sons of other women she would with simple reverence make her oblation to the children which had not been given her.

"It will cost you nothing," she urged. "Margaret Fiske said—"

But he arose from his chair and silenced her.

"You needn't mention that," he said. One more decent thing. He would do one more thing for that girl of another world.

The woman divined his decision.

"Then you will?"

"Of course I will. Such a small service can't com-

pare with the sacrifices you people have made. What do I do?"

"Get the money from my husband. He's treasurer of the fund. Then arrange for a place and see that the memorial is erected. Mr. Humphrey will tell you where we got an estimate for what we wanted. We can't have it because it will cost too much, but you get in touch with those people and they'll give you a price on something else."

"You say it was just what you all desire?"

"Yes."

"Was it what all the mothers of the village desired? Were your hearts set upon just such a memorial as that?" His eyes were alight with something like intoxication.

"Yes, but we dug up all we could and it wasn't enough. We're short five hundred dollars."

The telephone bell rang, and Maddox answered it.

"Mrs. Humphrey," said Corvan, doing things with a check book and fountain pen, "I'm going to give you a check for that five hundred dollars. We'll have the memorial we want, or we won't have anything." He wrote hastily. His eyes alight, his heart singing. In that moment he felt more close to Margaret Fiske than he had felt when she was close at his elbow. She might have been beside him. Her hand guided his pen.

"Yes," Maddox was yelling into the 'phone. "Yes, yes. Well, give me a wire I can hear somethin' on. Yes—"

"They'll be glad. They'll thank you," Mrs. Humphrey was saying.

"Five hundred and no one-hundredths," muttered Corvan, writing the check.

"Mr. Wade on the wire!" cried Maddox.

Corvan dropped his fountain pen at though electrified. Again that long arm was clutching at his shoulder. Again that reminding voice was in his ear: "Come back to the game, Dan Corvan! Come back to graft, where you belong!" it seemed to say. And his brief paradise was shattered.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MADNESS OF CORVAN

"Coming!" cried Corvan, as he hurried to the 'phone. To him it was as though in answering Wade's call he admitted the stronger influence of the life he could not lose. The life that quicksands could not take away from him.

"Hello!" On the other end of the wire Wade, with Bradley Queritt at his elbow, was doing quick thinking.

"This is Corvan!"

"Wade talking, Mr. James L. Wade. I am calling with regard to our correspondence about a block of Turnstile Stores stock which you own, Mr. Corvan." Desperately Corvan strove to attune his mind to this intrusion. But stronger than thought, resentment, repugnance surged in his mind.

"Yes, yes. But what do you call me for?"

"My principal in the matter is here beside me. He wants to know if you can come up and have a conference with us in New York." Wade was wringing his brain for some word of warning he might interpose. "Ask him to come for an evening at the theater," urged Queritt at his elbow. "Make it social."

If Corvan could have seen Wade's countenance in that moment he must have found some sympathy for him. As

it was, he felt only an overwhelming resentment. In the moment before the sound of Wade's reminding voice, he had stood upon the heights which she had shown him; a slight and unassuming girl had led him there, and he had stood in the serene satisfaction of kindly services. And Wade would call him back. Yet Wade could not make him answer that call.

"Impossible," he snapped into the 'phone; and on the other end of the wire Wade breathed more easily.

"I want you to be our guest at dinner. Let us plan an evening at the theater, pressed Wade's cold voice. "We can do our business in a minute. Not more than a minute of your time."

"Thank you," snapped Corvan, "but I'm not interested. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver and arose to wipe his hands upon a cambric handkerchief. They were damp. His forehead was damp.

He had stood upon the heights. And Wade would have called him back. Dragged him back.

He returned to Mrs. Humphrey with the uneasy feeling that he was being untrue to a code. He could not play in the quagmires and come out wholly clean.

. . . . . .

On the other end of the wire Wade turned to Bradley Queritt with the happy smile of a man for whom a miracle has been performed. Corvan could not have answered better, nor in a voice more calculated to reach the listening ear of the victim, if he had been coached beforehand. He did not stop to question the clairvoy-

ance which had prompted Corvan to play up to him so well. And he did not suspect that Mr. Bradley Queritt left his office with a shrewd suspicion that Wade and his friend on Long Island were not such strangers as Wade would have him believe.

. . . . . .

At almost the precise moment when Queritt, nursing this suspicion, left the marble halls of the Citizen's Trust Building, the third Mrs. Humphrey left the spacious portals of Corvan's rented manor. Maddox greeted Corvan as he returned from the ceremony of seeing the dauntless lady to her flivver.

"That's the tricks," he cried. "Gosh, you ask for a thing and it comes right home to you."

"And now what?" asked Corvan.

"It's just the game we was lookin' for. Now we just gotta let this memorial graft go till after the big clean-up, and we can breeze back to the city with the fund in our pockets. Nothing like makin' hay while the sun shines."

Corvan cut the Snake's enthusiasm with a voice that was a lash.

"Nothing like castles in Spain," he said.

"What's them?" asked Maddox.

"Pipe dreams," said Corvan. "I'm going through with this memorial proposition as straight as a die." He bounded up the stairs.

"You're crazy's hell!" gasped Maddox, and the youth stood in the hallway, aghast before the fact that the Great Corvan had gone mad.

CHAPTER XVIII

THREE LETTERS

At night Corvan returned to his manor. He was very tired, and yet he was hugely satisfied. He was enveloped in a sensation like the warm glow of amber in a subtly decorated lounge, like the invigorating sense of sunlight upon the naked body.

He had worked with Fiske all afternoon, and felt the burning blisters on his hands with a happy relish. The first day he had been helpless before the demands of fields and animals, but now he did better; and this afternoon he had been quick and deft in mending and repairing things which for months and years Fiske had not had time to touch.

Corvan cast off his stained white flannels and threw aside the fine flannel shirt he donned for work. He bathed luxuriously. It had been a good day. In the harmony of toil he had discovered more than the satisfaction to be derived from it. He had discovered Judson Fiske, a brave and wholesome man, humorous in the face of disaster to his dreams, which is the worst disaster that can befall a man. Margaret had derived her humor from him; her wholesomeness was her own. When he and Fiske had come in from their toil and found her with her mother, radiant in the kitchen . . . that had been the happiest experience of all.

Dressing, he felt the stillness of the house. It occurred to him that Maddox was not there. He wondered where Maddox could be. And then he knew the full significance of the day. He had forgotten.

Maddox, Wade, the man he was, and the purpose of his residence here—all had been blotted from his mind. The scheming and intrigue of his profession, the impending graft. All had been forgotten.

The warm glow left him. The sunlight departed. With the quicksand tugging at his feet and the hard-bitten countenance of Wade vividly in his mind, Corvan stood motionless.

He found himself gazing into the clear surface of the mirror and there he saw the smoothest confidence man in America; also he saw a whole hearted man who toiled happily in the farmyard for the radiant vision of a girl. Which of the two was himself?

He could fancy a figure standing at the shoulder of the man who was reflected in the glass. A sinister figure which admitted comradeship in its hard eyes. Wade, dominant and expectant, at his elbow. That was his fancy. But he remembered Margaret Fiske as she greeted him in the kitchen after his labor of the day. She was fact . . . substance . . . desirable flesh and blood. It is human to turn to the desirable.

Corvan put Wade out of mind.

. . . . . .

Maddox, whose absence had incited this dissension in Corvan's mind, was at the moment sitting in the restaurant of a road house on the Jamaica highway

with nothing more than a dirty tablecloth between himself and that figure which Corvan felt was at his elbow.

"He's crazy," Maddox could hardly find words to express himself. "The country's makin' a hick out of him. He runs around the village like a charity institootion doin' nice things for little kids with bats in their belfry."

Wade grinned a hard grin and bored Maddox with gimlet eyes.

"He's too smooth for you, Maddox, that's the trouble." Wade mocked the youth's distraction. "He's just playing for effect. Laying the stage. You got a lot to learn."

Unlike Corvan, Wade touched the subsoil of the underworld without distaste. He was dominant and often cruel in his dealings with them, but having himself arisen from the gutter, the gutter was not repugnant to him. Maddox was of finer stuff than most of his tools were made from. So he was lenient to Maddox, permitting the youth in his presence a certain ease.

"Sure!" blurted the Snake. "That's what I thought and that's what he said. But you don't get me, chief. At first it was just that he done a good turn for a bughouse kid. But then Beetle Brower comes down with the new lay, and what does he do? Does he sit down to lay out a bag of tricks? Does he tell me how I'm to act when the show-down comes? Does he back me up when I sees a chance for a safe graft with the rubes? . . . Like hell, he does!"

Wade perceived that Maddox was running wild. He pulled up the curb.

"Well, what *did* he do?"

His voice grated, bringing Maddox to earth.

"He chases around like it was Christmas and he was Santy Claus. D'yer know why he hung up on yer when yer called him the other day? . . . No. Well, he was chinning with an old dame about takin' seventeen hundred simoleons away from her to build a hick memorial."

Wade grinned.

"But it was straight!" cried Maddox. "He ain't keepin' the cash, he's goin' to put up a tombstone!"

Wade lost his grin. His face took on the impassivity of granite.

"Go on!" he ordered.

"And he turned you down because he was signin' a check for that hick graft."

"That's all right. It's to put himself in right. That's smooth stuff. What else?"

"Well, I couldn't get him on that lay, an' I says this bird is goin' bugs. But when he chases over to the farm of this skirt he's goin' with, and works out in the fields with her old man, why then I calls you up for the right play." He glanced at Wade and was aghast. A thundercloud had descended upon the man, and a passion of suspicion was in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" gasped Maddox.

Wade leaned toward him eagerly.

"You said a skirt. What skirt?" he demanded.

"Why, it's this girl he's waltzin' 'round with. She's got him bugs."

The brazen voice resounded with the clang of a veritable alarm.

"Dan Corvan has never fallen for a woman in his life!"

With the fierce gleam of Wade's hard, bright eyes, there filtered into Maddox's mind the significance of that alarm. Margaret Fiske was not a passing fancy.

"Well, he's bit now," faltered Maddox.

"And you say he's been working for her?"

"Yeah."

"With his hands?"

Maddox nodded.

"In the dirt," he said.

"God!" It was a tribute to the incredible. Wade pounced on Maddox with his hands clenched on the table.

"If he double crosses . . ." There was murder in his voice, and then the thought changed. "These things he does—the charity—was this girl in it?"

Maddox gasped at his questioner with a dawning fear that he had gone too far. His regard for Corvan was too complex for him to analyze; but he felt now that to Corvan this girl might be a sacred thing. He was worried about that.

"Well, *was she*?"

Maddox cringed.

"Yeah!" he said, miserably.

With his clenched hands Wade spurned the table, pushing his chair away from it. He sat with smoldering eyes gazing across the room. Dark, and, to Maddox, incomprehensible emotions swept across his hard,

life-branded face. Maddox only knew that in the mind of this willful, ruthless man he, Maddox, did not in this moment exist. He sat still, a little fearful, and waited.

Finally and with startling abruptness of movement, Wade sprang from the chair.

"Wait here!" he ordered harshly; and somewhat dolorously Maddox watched his bulky, vigorous figure as it strode off among the empty tables of the ill lit room.

Maddox drank innumerable cups of coffee while he listened to the drone of summer flies and questioned his impulsive action. He was tottering mentally upon the brink of a decision, that on the whole he had done right, when Wade returned. The man's face had lightened with the confidence of a physician who has propounded a promising remedy. He sank into the vacant chair and tossed three sealed envelopes on the table.

"I've got to trust you, Maddox," he said. It was a command. "I can't come down and see Dan now. Got to nurse the sucker. But there's three letters. I want you to let Corvan have them. Don't give 'em to him yourself, but if he ever shows a soft streak again, see that he finds the first one somewhere by accident. See, I've got numbers on 'em there in the corners."

"Yeah, but how by accident?"

Wade swore, his eyes gleaming with impatience.

"Use yer brain!" he snarled. "Let him see it on his bureau. Let a kid hand him one on Main Street. Every time he's slippin' let him get one of these reminders from me. That's what he needs—a reminder."

They talked it over, Wade driving in upon the receptive mind of Maddox the significance of his subtle scheme. It was like Wade, that scheme was. Crafty, cruel, he could be subtle if need be and here to his unwavering mind, greedy for the spoils of this new graft, was need.

He reviewed with Maddox every opening for the play of these reminders. He rehearsed the youth in every conceivable part he might be called upon to play, and finally he left Maddox to stand on the platform at Jamaica waiting for a train to take him on to the stage again, where the ensuing scenes of Corvan's destiny were to be enacted.

The three letters pressed upon his breast.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BONDS CHAFE

At the breakfast table Corvan glanced rapidly through his mail. It was a strange collection. Here was a letter from a doctor in Michigan. Good news. Here were letters from monument makers; estimates upon modest memorials. A letter from an auctioneer; the terms upon which he could handle the possessions of the Misses Spately who were giving up the post office; and tailor's bills.

He put them down on the table.

"Saw old Humphrey yesterday," he remarked.

Maddox, who could not accustom himself to the quiet luxury of meals behind French windows with the lawn beyond, turned from the persistent gaping to gargle a masticated griddlecake in his throat.

"Argle," he remarked, and swallowed. "What's that to do with me?" he then somewhat resentfully inquired. It irked Maddox that Corvan apparently accepted the natives with complaisance.

"You were lamenting the fact that so logical a target for the aim of an honest con man should be wasted."

"Sure, an' I still got the same opinion. You must think he's a branch of the family the way you lay orf him."

"I thought it would interest you to know that I've got old Humphrey biting so hard on a handful of chicken-feed that I could land him for a thousand before lunch time."

Maddox opened his eyes.

"You mean you got him for a gold brick?"

"I got him for a knockout. He's going to step in here at any minute now with an agreement that provides I'm to buy a lot for the village memorial from him for seven hundred dollars and split the profit."

"Huh," ennunciated Maddox. "Chicken feed is right. But I don't see how he loses if you got to pay up."

Corvan grinned.

"Well, in addition to the agreement, old Humphrey carries with him an inflated reputation worth at least a few thousand to him. If the village knew he was selling a memorial site and bribing me to buy it, he'd have heart failure. Can you imagine what he'd pay out to keep that agreement dark?"

Maddox betrayed in a mobile face the dawn of understanding.

"Wow!" he cried. "And we trim the old boy for a holdup? Great stuff!"

Corvan laughed.

"It would be," he confessed, "only as it happens it's outside the game. This little hand is all my own. Instead of holding the old note-shaver up for cash, I'm going to use that agreement to squeeze him out of the Fiske mortgage."

"How's that?"

"Just as I say. You want me to keep my hand in. Well, I'm doing it."

Maddox swore disconsolately.

Corvan played with the butter knife and a piece of toast. He grinned.

"Is this place getting on your nerves?" he asked kindly.

"My nerves? Oh, gawd!" Maddox stared off across the green lawn again. His gaze was moody. "Say," he burst forth, "maybe you get a kick out of sewing circles and fussin' under the wisteria. Maybe you got an idea you'll pose for some illustrated song slides some day, leanin' over the old green well, and like that. But when it comes to the little child leadin' 'em, even if she is sixteen years old and a pippin . . . well, I don't want to be led, that's all."

Corvan examined his companion sharply.

"Now what's the song and dance?" he asked. "If you're worrying about my visits to the Fiske farm, worry with your mouth shut. I've a business interest in that piece of land."

Maddox grinned provokingly.

"Mortgage liftin'?" he mocked.

Corvan's face lost all expression. He spoke coldly.

"What I meant was," he said, "If you can't talk about anything but my business—*shut up!*"

"Aw," Maddox winced under Corvan's gaze, "it wasn't your business I was talkin' about. I got worries enough of my own."

"With sixteen-year-old pippins?"

"Yeah. You certainly handed me the fur lined ham sandwich when you sicked me on to that remorseful sinner stunt."

"Didn't he believe you?"

"I hope not, but I don't know. What worries me is that *she* did."

"Oh, yes?" grinned Corvan widely. "You mean his sister, I suppose."

"Yeah, only there's two of them. An' they both work as a team to save my soul from hell. Only yesterday I was down to the point."

"The pool room?"

"Sure, old Henry Sumpty's joint, but I wasn't up to no game. You needn't be scared. Only down to the point there's a coast-guard plant complete that the government gave up when the captain died of havin' nothin' to do. An' there's an old mortar they used to use for shootin' lines out, see? Well, I digs it out, and there's a box of charges on the line. So I was in the navy, see? An' what I don't know about shootin' off guns can't be taught in ten hours a day, thirty-one days a month, for sixteen months."

"So you banged off all the pretty little cartridges? What a nice toy!"

"No, I didn't bang off all the pretty little cartridges. It ain't that kind of a gun. What I did was to offer ten to one odds that I could send that line out to wherever they said, as long as it was in range."

"That sounds fair enough."

"Sure. That's how I figured it. But did they

rise?" he snorted disastrously into his coffee cup and created new words while he wiped up the mess.

"They did not!" he said at last. "They was too wise. See?"

"Wise enough, you mean," grinned Corvan.

"All right. Anyway, there I was puttin' up a fair legitimate proposition, and in addition to that I didn't see it through. So there wasn't nothing to blame me for, was there?"

"Nothing you've admitted," said Corvan guardedly.

"Well, if I sat in front of them two women an hour, I sat there a whole afternoon, while they gassed about what a sinful thing it was to bet, an' how I was unfair to you. See? I let them girls see me penitent once, and now I got to be penitent all the time; an' it's just hell, that's all."

"Why did you go and visit them, then?"

Maddox opened his eyes widely and slowly, but obviously blushed. He covered the blush with a grin.

"I've got a business interest in that piece of land," he said. Then he hardened. "But it's all to the cranberries, chief. When you an' me go an' get softened up under the wistaria for fifteen minutes, say, that's all right. There ain't no harm in that. But we got to come off clean. It would be fine for the gang to hear how Daniel Corvan can't do no more bunco because the ladies' sewing club of East Harbor says it's just too wicked, wouldn't it?"

Corvan arose from the table impatiently. He must keep young Maddox in his place.

"Maddox, you're talking too damn big!" he said

succinctly. "Come down to earth. When you've learned to swing a deal any bigger than a cellar-door crap game, you can give your advice to whatever shell-game crowd you crawl into. But you're playing in big company when you play with Wade and Corvan—and, with this crowd, Corvan calls the play!"

The dominant, quiet voice, the quality of the man again overwhelmed Maddox with a sense of inferiority. His heart sank under Corvan's resentment as the heart of a lackey sinks before the anger of his prince. And because he was afraid, Maddox was furious.

"All right then!" he cried desperately. "Why don't you call it? What th' hell are you playin' at?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Corvan coolly.

"About you—"

"What have you got to say about me?" The cool voice was taunting Maddox; daring him to continue in this fury. Maddox arose from his chair, enraged. He leaned across the table snarling, and snarling, he caught Corvan's eye—and quailed.

"Nothing," he mumbled.

There was some one at the door.

"That will be Humphrey," said Corvan, and turning on his heel he left the room.

"Bugs!" gasped Maddox. "He's loony as they make 'em." And he made for the door which entered the living room from the rear. Corvan was still outside talking with the visitor in the hallway. So Maddox whisked a sealed envelope from his pocket and made for the desk in the alcove.

CHAPTER XX

QUAINT TRAGEDY

Having ushered Lionel Humphrey into the living room Corvan watched the old man as he opened and shut the dining room door with muttered references to eavesdroppers, as he shook back the curtains, and eyed the windows with immoderate suspicion. This done, Humphrey turned to his host, withdrew a paper from his pocket and offered it for Corvan's inspection.

"There it is," he said. "If you'll just let me have pen and ink we can put our names to it."

Corvan led him to a seat beside the desk in the alcove and provided him with the necessary materials. He himself sat in the swivel chair and appraised his visitor coolly.

The old man's withered face was an inappropriate setting, he reflected, for the even false teeth glistened between his thin white lips, making them protrude grotesquely. And Mr. Humphrey's toupee was peculiarly incongruous, inasmuch as it did not match the wisps of natural hair that appeared below it and in its quality basely betrayed the old man's parsimony. All this was set forth above a gray suit, chosen from the snappier designs of what the mail-order cata-

logue said the young man would wear. Corvan's lip curled with contemptuous amusement at the panoply.

"There," grunted the absurd old figure. He pushed the paper over to Corvan.

Corvan perused it. It was an agreement which provided that he was to buy a certain lot in the township described thus and so. For this he was to pay Lionel Humphrey seven hundred dollars, two hundred of which were described as profit, and this profit was to be divided equally between Lionel Humphrey and Daniel Corvan.

Corvan grinned as he reached for the pen. It had been so easy. He observed unconsciously that a letter lay upon the blotter, and made a mental note to investigate it later. He signed the agreement.

"Right," he said as he handed Humphrey a copy. "We can't be too careful how we conceal these. I'm afraid, Mr. Humphrey, our neighbors aren't trained to the subtleties of business."

"Fools!" muttered the other spitefully.

Corvan folded the paper up and placed it in his pocket with the reflection that, as a study of the human animal, old Humphrey was something new. Contrasting the old man with his wife, Corvan found that the third Mrs. Humphrey rose in his estimation. This wretched relic, he divined, was not capable of such an unselfish sentiment as aroused in the woman a compassion for dead children who were not her own. Old Humphrey was incapable of any sentiment whatever. Saving the sentiment of gain. The love of money.

He noticed that Humphrey's eyes dwelt upon the car-

pet, and, taking advantage of the opportunity, he indulged in a smile. Here was at least one decent thing he could do that would not touch him with the fear of quicksand. He could reveal to this miser the grip he had upon him, and demand his terms. He could listen to the old man rant in fury with the greatest satisfaction in the world. For from this he would derive the joy of an artist; the confidence man supreme, who, having lured his victim to ruin, could press his advantage with the knowledge that the power he held was the creation of his genius, his alone. Whatever the end in view, he could be the Great Corvan now.

"You can give me an abstract of title?"

The old man looked up. There was a light in his eyes that puzzled Corvan for a moment. Old Humphrey appeared to have found in the carpet a something that Corvan had not detected in his gaze before.

"Them," he said, "are just only formalities. There's something else again that I want to speak to you about now, Mr. Corvan. You done business with me, and you know me. I know you. Now what I want to say is this —" He appeared to have difficulty in saying it.

Corvan examined the shrewd green eyes thoughtfully. Not so shrewd now, he reflected. And not so green. What could the old man have in the back of his mind? He frowned in puzzlement.

And old Humphrey frowned.

"I been hoping we might do business together, Mr. Corvan," he began. "I wanted to get sort of in touch with you. Nothing like business to get men in touch with

a feller." He chuckled in insincere mirth; and Corvan perceived that he regarded this "business" he referred to as nothing irregular; nothing to be ashamed of.

"No," he agreed, "nothing like it."

"Well," burst forth the old man, "it's about that boy I'm talking. That Trench boy. My grandson."

Corvan's cold eyes noticed the other's shift to the carpet once again. And they marked the flush that mounted about the collar of the withered neck.

His grandson . . . It sounded almost as if the crabbed old money-grabber spoke those words with a touch of natural affection.

"A man don't find much that's sociable when he gets old," old Humphrey was saying. "He don't find the things that pleased him and gave him pleasure when he was young. They sort of fall away." Suddenly he raised his eyes from the carpet. He sat up straight in his chair, gripping the arms of it as though electrified. He screwed up his eyes, and from between the narrowed lids fixed Corvan with a glance that was fierce and defiant. It was an amazing transformation.

"These people say that I'm hard, and that I ain't got no heart for love in me. They don't know. They ain't business men, Mr. Corvan, like you and me. They're fools!" His fiery old eyes challenged Corvan to deny it; but did not wait for a reply.

"I know where my limits are!" he rasped. "I know I ain't one of these fellers that can paint a picture, build a house, or write books to read. That's given to some, and its their misfortune. But you and me, we're

business men, that's what we are. It's given us by God Almighty to see the value of money and make the most of it. That's our bounden duty. But it don't say that we ain't got a heart, does it? It don't say we ain't got lungs and bellies like the rest, does it? . . . So we got a heart like them as well!"

He sank back in his chair, his withered hands relaxing,

"And that's what it comes to," he said more softly, "making pictures or making houses, or making books or making money. It amounts to that. We live to make what God Almighty said we'd oughter." He paused a moment to lean a little forward, to devour with his eyes Corvan's whole countenance and every change of expression. "But why?" he questioned. "Why do we slave and toil? And why do we set the world against us?" In a low voice he answered his own question. "To build up. That's why. And who for do we build? . . . For them that come after. That's who. We build for them that come after. And I build up for Harold Trench. For a boy who turned out into an idiot!"

Corvan had listened in silence. It is a startling thing to see the cloak of life stripped from a naked soul; and this Corvan had seen. It was he who gripped the arms of his chair now.

"But we can cure him!" he cried.

Humphrey writhed on the edge of his seat.

"You're sure?"

"Sure. Got a letter this morning. He's through the operation and on the way to recovery."

The old man sank back.

"I've been living for that these years," he whispered. "Mr. Corvan, you've heard me. I love that boy! What is our building good for, if them that come after can't profit? And he can be made good? He can be a man like any other!" Then he was upon Corvan again; stretched forward, his false hair awry, his shriveled face ridiculously contorted. So that Corvan felt a deep compassion for him. "When I heard about it, I couldn't believe it," whispered the old man, "and they told me it was so. They told me how you did it; sent him away. And then I said I'd come to you. I said I'd come. And you was, like me, a business man. So I could come."

Unthinkingly Corvan picked up the letter from the desk and fingered it.

"But you need not have come to me. It wasn't my doing—"

"You paid?"

"Yes, I paid."

"Then it was your doing. And that's why I came. Because it must be me that pays. Me! You can see that. You're a business man!" the old man squirmed in excitement on his chair, insinuating himself nearer to Corvan. "It must be me!" he cried. "What good is it all, if it ain't me who makes this boy whole? You heard me, and you know me. You can see that if I can't do this thing, then all my life ain't for no manner of use! It's me that must pay! How much?"

With this eager demand he seized the lapel of Corvan's coat. "How much?" he cried in a frenzy of de-

sire. And Corvan was dumb. Before that naked soul he was ashamed. In the face of a heart exposed he could not speak. For the soul he saw was a twisted, tortured thing, and words were nothing before it.

"Tell me now!" rasped the old man. "Give me the price, and I'll pay it." Corvan arose and the eager soul arose with him, close upon him, with a withered hand upon his collar. "Don't worry," he whimpered, "it ain't out o' the way. It's business!"

"Yes," said Corvan, surprised at the sound of his own voice, "it's business."

"But tell me!" insisted Humphrey. "How much? It ain't much I'm askin', only tell me!"

Corvan pressed away from him, but the old man hung on, his face working, his fingers twisting and writhing.

"Anything!" he cried. "I'll pay anything, but it must be me!"

"Don't worry," said Corvan.

"But tell me the price!"

The price of the only thing in the world that was beyond price to him. The thought flashed into Corvan's mind. Why did he hesitate? Of course the old man must have his way.

"Let's see." His eyes dropped as he calculated the cost. And he stiffened. His mind turned numb. The envelope in his hand was addressed in handwriting, and *the handwriting was that of Wade!*

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST LETTER

Corvan looked up and saw the old man fidgeting feverishly before him as a grotesque thing seen through a mist.

"What is it?" demanded Humphrey eagerly. But Corvan's eyes gazed far beyond him, and his ears were filled with another voice.

"Just a minute!" he cried, and incontinently strode from the room. Fled for a refuge with himself. In the passage he tore open the letter and read:

There's nothing so easy but it becomes difficult when you do it with reluctance.

Corvan stood for a moment as though transmuted to a man of stone. It seemed all life and the warmth of life had gone out of him. He drew a long deep breath, and life returned. But it was another life; for in that almost imperceptible moment, his mind had striven with a mighty effort, and it had won. He would throw out this insidious call of sentimentality and softness. Wade was tangible before him. Wade's handwriting was before his eyes. Wade's voice was in his ear. To

dabble with all this sob stuff was to court ruin for them both.

Nothing so easy. He grinned. Wade spoke truth. The graft was the real thing, and he, dabbling in the little lives of narrow souls, had been pursuing the graft with reluctance deeper than, until now, he had been aware. While Wade, alone, rose to the Olympian heights of an exertion which was real.

With a trained faculty for seeing instantly the advantage in every circumstance, Corvan perceived that, carried off his feet by the old man's unwitting dramaturgy, he had for the first time in his life almost missed the main chance. He strode into the room with himself once more controlled.

"How much will it be?" cried the old man, and Corvan saw that he had paced ceaselessly up and down the carpet in his absence.

With a cool smile he drew from his pocket the agreement.

"I've done a lot of fool things since I came to this country, Mr. Humphrey," he said, "and I've no doubt you wouldn't call them strictly business . One of them is in the way of a determination. I determined a few days ago that Judson Fiske has worked too well, and too hard, to lose the rewards of his work."

The old man shriveled into himself. His green eyes lost their pleading, and his lips were drawn straight across his teeth.

"What you talkin' about?" he snapped.

"This." Corvan held the agreement before him. "I

was going to take this agreement, and offer to tear it up and forget it, if you agreed instead to renew your mortgage on the Fiske farm. If not I was going to read the little document to the memorial committee and make you eat dirt. Now look."

Slowly, and with a mocking grin, he tore the paper into strips.

"You're crazy!" gasped the old man.

"No! I've got a better hold on you now." The smooth, cool voice was cutting and clear. "You have admitted that if you can't use your gains to make that grandson of yours a new man, your life is ruined." He approached the old man closely. *"And you meant that!"* he said. Without compunction he saw Humphrey flinch.

"God Almighty!" Humphrey's eyes popped ludicrously, woefully his mouth fell away. "You don't mean it!" he gasped.

With a cruel smile Corvan turned the knife.

"If you don't renew the Fiske mortgage," he pointed out, "a stranger will do the work you're begging to do yourself."

Humphrey stood before him with the pathos that only an old man in the face of ruin can assume. A picture of shattered life that can only be compared with death.

"Oh, God!" he said. "I wanted it." And Corvan knew that for old Humphrey there was no alternative. A mortgage was a mortgage, and life itself was only life. The two did not meet, and the purchase of a soul could not be confused with discount and exchange. Old Humphrey could more easily have contemplated suicide as a price

for his desire than the cancellation of a business contract. It was a study as pitiful as strange. Yet Corvan, remembering himself, was pitiless.

"That's the price," he said.

Humphrey turned upon him then the fire of a spiteful rage.

"Damn you!" he screamed. "Damn you! You're like the rest of them! You kick a man. You stone him. You tear a man's heart and soul, just for that he keeps his talents like he was made to do. Well, you got my answer. Damn you!"

With a noiseless curse from his old eyes, he passed Corvan and made his way from the house. As he passed through the door Corvan heard him mutter, "But I wanted it!" And Corvan felt no happiness in his absurd victory.

He stood in the doorway whence he had followed that withered figure in its grotesque garb of youth. As he shuffled away, the mincing gait he usually affected all forgotten, the twisted figure of old Humphrey suggested uncannily the twisted soul within him. Corvan watched him until he disappeared down the drive, then he looked away over the country to the water. The air was clear with that clearness which precedes a storm. Corvan, knowing nothing of this omen, could nevertheless feel the unreality of the atmosphere, and sense conflict in the air. He had determined to cast out the devils that dragged him toward the quicksands, and yet after this encounter he could not cast them out. He felt indescribably ashamed as one feels ashamed who

has treated cruelly a little child. Yet he knew his fealty to Wade, and his place in the game of life. He must be strong.

He was walking down the country road now, and found himself headed unwittingly toward the Fiske farm. Very well, he would see her again. And he remembered the voice of Wade, which reminded him that his friendship for her must come to nothing. Let it come to nothing. He at least could have a word with her.

And yet he did not have a word with her. He found his mind was a field of battle where neither side gained victory. Time and again he turned toward the farmhouse only to put his back toward it and seek the apathetic consolation of the sea. For hours he walked upon the shore gazing into a distance which could never answer his mute questioning, but which grew darker as the day grew old. And when he at last fringed the sandy wastes of the long point and turned from his feast of the peaceful beauty that surrounded it, he picked out her home by the lights which twinkled from its windows. It was late, and he had missed his dinner. But it was later before he returned again to the manor which mocked him with the ironic assurance that all it stood for in the serene world of which it was the center could never be his. Could never hold a worthy place in the high destiny of crookdom, which was Corvan's.

CHAPTER XXII

STORM

Corvan saw the storm arise in the night. He saw it come sweeping out of the northeast with a fury of black clouds and a wind that lashed the bay into breakers and drove a fine rain, stinging, against his face. He had been standing upon a high dune where the cedars were dwarfed and twisted into shapes that chimed with the distraction of his mind. And he smiled as the wind swept through them, for the conflict pleased him. But he was lightly clad and the rain turned him to the thought of shelter. It was then that he returned to his hired mansion; but once there, he could not sleep. He paced the dining room where the French windows gave him a view of the tempest that swayed the trees outside, and he found shelter from his thoughts in the spectacle of seething foliage; in the sounds of moaning wind and the insistent rattle of the rain.

He discovered that it was a formidable thing for a man to question life. As the branches shoot from the parent trunk, so uncountable conflicting thoughts sprang from the issue which afflicted him, and thronged his mind with problems that could not be discarded or resolved.

He awoke in a morris chair, and found the light of

early morning in the room. Outside the sky was clear and blue, but the wind had increased and he was astounded by the noises it wrung from the tortured trees. He stood for some moments staring out at the conflict wherein invisible hands seemed to wrestle with thrashing branches, and his eyes lit up at the apparent might of the resistance it engendered. He knew that he could not endure this morning another placid breakfast hour with Maddox, and at the same time he felt the call of the dunes and the water-beaten beaches, which had been so congenial to his mood the night before. He answered it. Before Maddox appeared at the comfortable board in the big, light dining room, Corvan had made his wind-whipped way over miles of sandy wasteland. He had ascended every dune that reared its blunt head for seven miles along the beach, and then, with the wind at his back, had retraced his steps toward the point. His face had been stung by the spray and the blown sand. His lungs had been filled with the salt air of the open waters. His body had been whipped and tugged by the conflicting wind, and he felt glad, as a fighter must feel glad, in the heat of battle. But it had been a physical battle only. Before the resistance of the elements the conflict in his mind was dulled. And in that dull state it had become extraordinarily simple. Merely a matter of choice, he decided.

The Great Corvan had come to East Harbor, and there he had been able to help the natives. He had only to choose now, whether, because of these small philanthropies he would become as these natives were,

or whether he would remain the Great Corvan? A simple problem, surely. A fatuous problem, he reflected; because it had but one answer. He was the Great Corvan, and the Great Corvan could not slip.

As the wind whipped him, he laughed at it. As the spray of the great seas stung his face, he flung back his head and laughed. As the sand dashed against his eyelids, he braced himself against the wind, laughing. There was no problem left for him. And as the insistent, undeniable vision of a clear-eyed girl tugged at the fringe of his mind, he laughed.

In this manner he came to the point once more. And it is notable that at approximately the time he reached the point, Mr. Bradley Queritt, moved by suspicion, took a train in New York with the purpose of investigating Corvan's probity in person.

. . . . . .

In the sandy enclosure, which was the front yard of a frame house that clung to a sheltering dune, were Muriel and Agatha Sumpty, striving with panic in their hearts to drag Silas, aged three, from an empty cask into which he had crawled, head first.

"He won't come out!" wailed Agatha, who was seven. And she tugged desperately at a chubby leg while its owner made subterranean noises in the depths.

"Pull!" urged Muriel. And their lamentations were subdued in fear of parental intervention.

Corvan vaulted the fence and lent his strength to the good work. But strength would not avail. Silas, on entering the cask, had ignored all scientific considera-

tions in the disposal of his chubby arms, so that, like the barbs of an arrow, they prohibited his withdrawal. Corvan's efforts merely augmented the subterranean noises within.

"If you just knock a coupla hoops off that cask, the kid'll fall right out," advised a dispassionate voice at Corvan's elbow. Corvan turned to find a little man with a rich copper face and colorless hair and brows regarding the operation with elaborate disinterest.

"Where's a hammer?" asked Corvan.

But the little man had the necessary implements in his hands. Regardless of the protests from within the cask, he upended it with the two chubby legs waving in the air, and adjusting a grooved chisel under the top hoop, struck it smartly with his hammer. Two blows did it, and two more blows disposed of the hoop that remained. Then, with an enpurpled Silas wailing on the ground, the little man picked up his tools and returned to the house. Corvan, alarmed at the terrific noises which Silas made to rise above the sound of the wind, sank to the ground on one knee and smiled into the child's face. The smile that never failed to win the confidence of men did not fail him now. Silas, encountering that smile, stopped his wailing dewily to return it, and Corvan, immensely flattered, picked him up to set him laughing, on the fence rail. Two months before, the proverbial wild horses could not have drawn Corvan to deal so intimately with a grubby little boy.

The taciturn man returned to Corvan's elbow, and snickered grimly.

"Got any yourself?" he said gruffly.

"No, I wish I had," smiled Corvan. And the little man's grin turned to a sneer.

"You wouldn't if you had ter feed five of 'em on nothing a year, and another one comin'," he conjectured.

Corvan remembered the words of Maddox.

"Are you Henry Sumpty?" he asked.

Dourly the little man confessed it. Corvan reviewed the information that Maddox had given him, and as he did so he regarded the unpainted dwelling as it hugged the sheltering dunes.

"And you're expecting another?" he asked pleasantly. Sumpty grunted.

"Is that what you came down to see me about?" Corvan sensed the little man's resentment of what he obviously construed as an intrusion. He turned impatiently away, and, facing the sea, was pleased at the sight of the fair, rank grasses of the beach which bent but did not give before the onslaught of the wind. . . . In the middle of the seething grasses stood a rock. "A rock with a brass plate on it and a bit of park," the third Mrs. Humphrey had said.

The expression recurred to Corvan in that moment of tumult with uncanny clearness. A memorial to the sons of fishermen. They had no doubt often sighted the harbor entrance by that rock.

"I want to buy this beach front!" he answered Henry Sumpty. "How much?"

And before the wretched little man could realize

the miracle which had turned his wasteland into a salvation, the gale struck the point.

It came like a thunder clap. A great explosion of wind that was piled upon wind. A mighty blast that struck the point as a high-powered shell might strike, and the noise of it was augmented by the damage that it wrought.

A gnarled cedar was snapped at its roots with the crack of a three-inch gun; and Sumpty's boathouse beyond the dunes, was torn from its frail foundations and flung upon its side to lay quivering in the gale like a wounded animal. And the frame house in its shelter trembled.

Corvan's first thought, after the numbed pause which followed the blast, was to hurry the frightened children to the house. Then he followed the stricken fisherman as he plunged into the unabating wind toward the wreckage of his boathouse.

"There's nothing you can do!" he roared in warning. But the gale took the words from his mouth and flung them away.

He saw Sumpty struggle to the shivered carcass of his shack and lay a futile hand upon the wreck, and beyond that he saw the water. It confounded him. He had seen little of high seas in his life, and now he looked upon the greatest gale of years. The hitherto calm waters of the bay were thrashed into irrepressible hills of water which moved with the menacing power of moving mountains. And when they struck the beach they made the noise of thunder.

The water dashed far higher than the wreckage of Sumpty's boathouse and Corvan perceived that the ruined shell must soon be swept away.

"Come back!" he roared, and knowing his words to be futile, he violently dragged the fisherman up the beach.

"There's nothing you can do!" he shouted. Sumpty sank to the beach beside him.

"I reckon not," he cried.

Corvan saw the shell swept out, a little match box thing in the anger of the waters, and he braced himself to stand against the wind as he gazed beyond it toward the point. There the awful grandeur of the sea made highest holiday. There was shallow water off the point, and beyond the narrow channel, which entered the little harbor, lay a barricade of great gray rocks. The rocks had long since been broken by the onslaught of the water as it seethed from the shattering sand bar to the depths, and the uneven outlines of the stone presented jagged battlements and upreared fingers about which the water boiled in majestic and insensate fury. It was a regal sight, and before it the turbulence of Corvan's mood uprose, invigorated. His spirits met the spirit of the raging waters. Involuntarily he stretched out his arms and tasted the spray upon his lips.

"Conflict!" he shouted. "God, if I could rise above it!" But his words were silenced by the wind.

Sumpty clutched at his sleeve.

"But he'll never make it!" he shrieked in Corvan's ear.

"Make what?" cried Corvan, and stared in the other's eyes.

"Can't you see him?" roared the other. "There in the harbor mouth? He'll never make it. Poor devil. He'll never make it. He can't!"

And Corvan, following with his eyes the pointing finger, saw a solitary motor boat tossing like a cork in the relentless seas. It was a cabined boat, of some fifty feet over all, such as fishermen use, and it was obviously struggling to make the harbor. As it was flung up and down on the heaving water, it seemed as though each moment must see it disappear forever; yet it gallantly persisted. Corvan saw it swung from its course by the conflicting waters off the point, and expected to see it swamped by the upsurging combers, but it stubbornly turned into the wind and swung about to repeat its desperate attempt.

Occasionally, as they watched its gallant efforts, they heard in fugitive blasts the sound of its struggling engine.

"When that goes," roared Sumpty, "he's a goner!"

A flivver rattled down to the point and a group of men hurried toward them. They too had seen the imperiled cockleshell; the whole village had seen it. What was to be done? How could they save the wretched mariner? He could never make it. And others were arriving, all excitement, all shrieking and shouting. Advice, anxiety, and urgent pleading. There were women appearing like magic from the sands. Plead-

ing, screaming against the wind, asking if nothing could be done.

And Corvan stood rooted to the sand, his eyes glued to that boat. Was he about to see a man die in the raging waters? Was this the answer to the tumult of the night? Was this a reminder of what a little thing he was? And how small a thing his puny strife could be before the conflict of elemental forces? He threw back his head and felt with a certain exultation the brine that stung his face. He was seeing a man fight for life, must he stand rooted with these yokels and see him die? He felt that he could achieve anything in the face of this blasting storm. Could he achieve the saving of this life? And he heard the motor-boat's engine fail.

A woman screamed. A shrill scream which rose above the thunder of the storm.

"Done!" roared Sumpty in his ear, and there was a rush of men to the water's edge. A rush of men who waded out into the boiling water and stood helpless in the foam.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SNAKE ASSISTS

The cockleshell boat, deprived of its power, was swung helplessly into the seas which boiled about the point, to tremble, lurching, in the combers for a brief moment. Then, swiftly, ineluctably, it was whisked from the channel toward the gray barrier of rock, and, as a feather is borne by the wind it was swung high upon the jagged teeth of stone. There for a moment the waters left it, so that it stood with its white faced mariner in its stern, suspended above the waves. But only for a moment. With another blast of the gale the uprising waters hurled their white anger upon it, to dash it against the stone which held it fast and well-nigh fling the man who clung there to his death.

"Get him a rope!" roared Corvan.

"Against this wind?" shrieked Sumpty.

"We've got to reach him somehow!" shouted Corvan. "We can't let him die before our eyes!"

He could see their twisting lips as they replied but the noise of the wind and waters killed the sound of their words. He could read the answer in their faces.

Another motor had arrived. Maddox was at the wheel, and he brought Margaret Fiske with him. Maddox hurried to Corvan's side.

"Where is it, chief? He asked the question as one who would be shown the sport of the day. But Corvan was silent, gazing past Maddox, at the girl. What fate had brought her here? With supreme egotism he had already divined a premonition in the storm, a symbol for himself in the endangered wreck. And now she had come. Was she to play her part in the turmoil which beset him? Was it her part always to come and lead him to her heights? To conjure insistently his fine misanthropy into something which warned him might contaminate her?

"What's the excitement?" Maddox bellowed. It was not the first time that that voice had called him from the thought of her. Impatiently he pointed out the stricken boat, and was himself moved by the sight of it, beaten and awash in the hungry waters, with the gray-black rock which held it fast.

"We've got to get out a line!" roared Corvan.

"A line?" Maddox suspected the worst.

"A line!" shrieked Corvan. "That man's on the brink of death!" He held the line in a coil before him, hopelessly.

Maddox sized up the situation in a glance.

"Sure!" he cried eagerly. "The old mortar'll do it. Come on chief!" And he turned a brisk, commanding voice upon the others. "Follow me!" he cried. He was suddenly, amazingly, self-confident, abrupt, resourceful.

With a confused feeling that this masterful young man was not the Maddox he knew, Corvan followed, and Maddox led the little group of men and boys around

the shoulder of the dunes to a square frame house which stood forth in a splendor of neatness among the other shacks of the water front.

"The old coast-guard station," explained Maddox. "Watch me!" He slid around to the side of the building and executed some legerdemain with the shutter of a window. The shutter came off in his hands.

"Bum hinges," he roared into Corvan's ear.

"For God's sake, hurry!" screamed a woman's voice behind them; and glancing back Corvan saw the stranded boat exposed by water that fell away from it like the failing clutch of a greedy hand.

"The door!" cried Maddox and disappeared through the window. Corvan was at the door when Maddox opened it from within.

"Run it out!" he snapped. A dozen hands ran forth the mortar which he indicated, and Corvan stood in the neat but dusty rooms of an abandoned coast-guard station, and saw Maddox in the height of his transformation.

"Lay hold, chief!" cried the alert Snake. He was tugging at a large square box but it needed four men to carry it forth and place it beside the gun at Maddox's instruction.

Maddox seemed enlivened by invisible and potent springs. He dashed from the abandoned station to see the gun placed where he felt it most secure; then back to the house again where he ransacked cupboards with a frenzy of ordered haste. The cupboard doors exposed

a pigeonholed expanse of shelves. In the pigeonholes lay a number of little round bags.

"See them?" cried Maddox, as he tore forth armfuls of them. "Powder. Grab that and come on!"

"That," which Corvan grabbed, was a four-foot staff with a weight on one end; to the other end a line was attached.

Outside he found Maddox jabbing another staff vigorously down the barrel of the mortar which he was surprised to find a thing of slimmer dimensions than he had thought.

"Quick!" roared Maddox. "Fasten the line to the staff!" He indicated the great square box and left the gun for an instant to thrust the weighted staff into the hands of a near-by fisherman, who, flinging open the box, dragged forth the end of a rope which was coiled within it. This he lashed with a skillful hand to the line that was attached to the staff.

"All right!" barked Maddox, and seizing the weighted staff he rammed the metal weight down the muzzle of the gun. It was a projectile.

Corvan turned to the sea, and his heart contracted as he missed the sight of the boat upon the rocks. But the water fell away again, and he saw the shell of breaking wood, and the figure which stood swinging its head from side to side like a wild animal seeking a loophole from the hunt. A great burst of spray leaped upward, and the figure was obscured. When the water fell once more, the man in the boat was on his knees, limp against the gunwale.

"Don't know if I can make it . . . got t'allow for the wind!" Maddox was sighting the gun.

A fresh blast of wind came howling from the northeast and in bedlam they saw the boat seized once more by the green might of the water. They saw it grasped as if by strong hands, torn from its rocky strand and thrown with a crash they felt rather than heard against a tall finger of stone. And they saw the wretched mariner cling with desperation to a vessel that was obviously breaking up beneath him.

"Don't hit the man!" shrieked Sumpty.

"Quick! or it's no good trying!" yelled the hoarse voice of Curt Wimble.

But Corvan felt that this new Maddox could be trusted. He stood with a queer strained feeling in his breast, as if by a force within him he could delay the disintegration of that frail shell until Maddox sent out the line. Maddox was adjusting a lanyard in the breech with deft fingers.

"Only a minute!" he gasped, and Corvan grasped tightly the shoulder of a stranger who stood beside him.

"Stand clear of the line!" roared Maddox, and violently shoved men away from the big square box. He gave a violent jerk at his lanyard. The gun exploded with a detonation that was scarcely heard above the storm. The projectile with its staff shot forth and turned in the air, and then, in a serpentine curve, the line went out.

In tense silence they watched the exquisite path of the whistling rope, and above the thunder of the wind and water could be heard the sharp cries which followed the

sight of that rope as it overshot the stranded vessel and twined itself about the rocky finger that towered above.

"Lay hold! Grab it!" Shriek after shriek was lost in the din. But the man in the boat needed no urging. With upstretched arms he sought eagerly to grasp the line that hung above his head. As he reached upward, the sea that had wrecked him seemed to aid. It hurled the deck on which he stood high in the air, smashing it against the rock that held salvation. The man's clutching fingers grasped the line, and they saw him pass it about his breast, but another sea flung him violently against the stone, and seemed to dash the life out of his body. With the line about his armpits he collapsed to hang limply suspended from the finger of rock about which that line was twisted. His toes hardly touched the boat when the retreating seas drew it low, and the spray dashed across his form with unabating greed.

"Oh, God!" moaned a voice in Corvan's ear. It was Sumpty.

"Too late!" cried the quiet voice of the gray-haired stranger at Corvan's side; and Maddox stood helplessly beside his gun.

"We must get out to him!" cried Corvan. All the contest in his blood was aroused. They could not lose this wretched man now.

But the hopeless faces about him bore witness to the impossibility of his desire. No boat could buck those seas, and it was manifestly insane to try to swim. And then Corvan recollected the interior of the abandoned

coast-guard station. There were life belts there. He had seen them on the walls. Without a word he dashed into the house and seized one, to come forth to the shore buckling the jacket about his breast.

CHAPTER XXIV

CORVAN MAKES A CHOICE

They gathered about him, protesting. It was suicide. He was mad!

But Corvan was not mad. He had figured the thing out, and was already lashing to the rope that ran from the box a line he had made fast about his waist.

"Make fast that rope!" he roared to Maddox, silencing his protests. "I can pull myself out hand over hand! Now tie a line to me, and if I go under you can pull me in. There's no danger."

"That's a lie," smiled the quiet stranger, who, even in the gale and the uproar, managed to convey the impression of being a perfect gentleman. Expert fingers made fast the life line and adjusted a rope to Corvan's middle. "Shake hands!" said the stranger. "You're trading away your life." And Corvan unwittingly shook hands for the first time with Bradley Querritt; but his eyes were fixed on the face of Margaret Fiske and he tried in vain to read the message in her clear, brave eyes. He could not fathom the truth of her emotions, but in her presence he felt encouraged.

With a last brief glance at his lashings, Corvan strode deliberately into the surf. And the surf, in ecstatic violence, took deliberation from him. In an instant after

his first immersion, Corvan knew that he must fight for more than that life on the wreck. He must fight for his own life as well.

And he fought. With a cold intensity that defied panic, he concentrated his mind upon the primary endeavor. That was to maintain his grasp upon the life line and pull himself, hand over hand along it, until he reached his objective. As he did this the waters welled up in heaving might, tore at his arms, and surged over his head, immersing him again and again. He gasped the air in great gulps of breathing whenever his head arose above the surface, and with every tendon of his arms strained to cracking, he resolutely pulled himself outward.

On the beach Maddox, in a frenzy, browbeat all and sundry of the gaping villagers with adjurations to keep taut the life line; and they tugged at it without abating.

When Corvan reached the boat, his head swam and his chest was near to bursting. Sensibly, he took advantage of the heaving waves to swing himself up to the battered deck. And then, sensibly, he relaxed for a space. Yet he had not lost thought of his object. While Maddox on the beach roared denial of the excited cries that Corvan was exhausted, Corvan himself eyed the limp form of the mariner which lay on its face at his side, and contemplated the task of returning with that burden.

A great sea dashed up behind him and sent him crashing across the body of the man he had come to save. It threw his head against the gunwale of the boat and Corvan, with blood across his eyes, for an instant was

blind and half conscious. It occurred to him that he could never get this man back. He doubted if he alone could breast that sea again. He was all but done. Then with saner vision he knew that he must lash the man to himself. The men on the shore would do the rest.

As another sea immersed him, he grasped the form of the lonely mariner, and the heaving waters helped him to pull the man close to him, and lift him up. The sustaining comber gone, however, Corvan felt the full weight of the body in his arms, and it was the dead weight of stone. He sank beneath it, and with the grotesque inertia of a dummy, the limp form slipped from his arms and flopped upon the deck.

Desperately Corvan tugged at him; knelt in a heaving tumult of brine against which he strove to keep his place. He got the man's body over his shoulder and struggled blindly to lash an end of the line about his own waist to the other's middle. Another sea rushed in, and the body was flung from his shoulders, bringing Corvan down with it. It was as though, waist deep in a raging sea, he fought a fantastic battle with a corpse.

In a frenzy of despair he scrambled to his feet, choking with the harsh brine in his throat. He grasped the man by the breast of his shirt. He shook him furiously and shrieked above the din of the storm into the uncomprehending face.

"Help me!" he cried. "For God's sake, help me!"

It was the first time he had looked into the face of this man he had come to save, and with the cry that accompanied his glance, his own face blanched as

the blood receded and his heart stood still. He was gazing upon the ruinous, wasted features of Jed Grimshaw!

Corvan went down upon his knees and the inert man in his hands went down before him. The face, which, on the night of the shooting, had leered green in the lamplight as they passed Broderick's limp form down to the boat, was now as repulsive as before. The bleared eyes were closed, and the leer of the ragged lips had given place to the drawn tightness of vast exhaustion. With a pang of distaste and repulsion that was keen as pain, Corvan winced and covered up his eyes.

A breath akin to a sob arose in his throat.

Without sentiment or reason he had cast his life into this hell of waters to save another man. And this was the life appointed for him to save.

He thought of Margaret Fiske. With her presence at his elbow he had been girded for this sacrifice, and it was only that he might drag from the waves this slime of the uncleanest depths his past had ever plumbed. He had played with symbols. Here was a symbol surely. In saving this wretch he could lay at the feet of that girl the embodiment of all in his life that was unworthy, unclean, and foul.

A blast of wind smote the waters and massed seas shivered the craft beneath his feet. With an unnatural strength Corvan arose, grasping Grimshaw tightly in his arms. The man's dead weight tore at Corvan's heart.

Clutching at the rock, which seemed to move as the

boat tossed up and down beneath it, Corvan looked wildly about him. To save this wretched man was to reveal to the clean world of his rented manor, the true Corvan. The Great Corvan, of whom he had been proud. And Corvan could not tolerate that revelation.

How if he failed to save this useless carcass? Surely the man was near dead! Like a part of the storm that raged about him a thought howled in his mind.

He could attempt to take Grimshaw ashore and lose his grasp upon him!

That was a simple way out! Almost necessary. The boat was breaking fast. He could not save both himself and Grimshaw. With the man in his arms he decided fiercely: *He would not* save him!

Corvan turned to the shore. Himself made fast to the life line, he would plunge into the water again and let Grimshaw take the chance of his ability to hold him fast.

In a single glance he caught a full panorama of the shore line.

There stood the crowded villagers straining their eyes to watch his action, and the life line stretched from him to them, where men strove to keep it taut. Behind them rose the dunes and away to the west the white shore line swung back to the meadows. Beyond the meadows the white houses of the village and the simple spire of the church. Hungrily he saw it all, and coming back to the crowd he saw Margaret Fiske standing a little apart from the rest. Her skirt was blown out by the violence of the wind; her face was turned toward him.

Well he knew the expression in her eyes. There was

faith and belief there. Faith in him. Belief that he would win.

It was not until that moment that Corvan knew how valuable was the hold of the quicksand he had fought.

This was his village; these people, his, and she on the sands had faith. Then he knew that he could not betray her faith; that he must return to her with Grimshaw in his arms, or he must not return at all.

While the sea buffeted him, clutched and tore at the burden in his arms, he made Grimshaw fast to the rope about his waist and gave the tugs at his line which were the signal they waited for on shore.

As he was pulled through the strangling turmoil of water he strove to hold Grimshaw high. Himself near drowning, he yet fought to keep the other's head out of the sea.

They dragged Corvan and his burden through the surf with quick and eager hands, and when the two forms came to the beach, Corvan was seen to stand erect for a moment in the surf, and struggle to lift the rescued man in his arms. But he failed in this, and went down, exhausted. They carried the two men in, and zealous hands administered to them. Maddox, outraged at the violence to which the half-conscious Corvan was subjected, raved against the well-intentioned villagers.

"Let him be!" he cried. "He ain't drownded!"

"Take him up in the car," directed a quiet voice, and Bradley Queritt, taking charge of the situation, saw Corvan placed in his car and driven home.

Maddox would have gone with him but Margaret Fiske was at his elbow.

"This man!" she cried. "We must take him! He mustn't die!"

On the beach they had used heroic methods and Jed Grimshaw was dimly conscious.

"He saved him!" the girl urged. "He must live! Bring him up to the house!"

A little car was commandeered and Maddox, swayed by her eager enthusiasm, saw the man placed within, and himself took the wheel. The little car rattled away for the village.

Margaret Fiske was intent that Corvan's sacrifice should not be in vain. She herself would preserve the life he had offered his own to save. While Corvan was hurried away from her, she could derive an unselfish satisfaction from the knowledge that, when he revived, the man he had saved would be alive to testify to what manner of man Corvan was.

CHAPTER XXV

BRADLEY QUERITT

Corvan's exhaustion did not last. A hot bath, a short rest, some steaming drinks and then crisp fresh clothing was all that he required.

He sat in the cretonne-hung bedroom, dressing. The clothes that came first to his hand were a suit of dark tweeds. He put them on. He liked the loose freedom of the knickerbockers, and the softness of the light wool golf stockings.

He felt profoundly tired, feeling after his great exertion the lack of a night's sleep. And he had been upon his feet with unaccustomed walking for many hours. Yet there was a surface exhilaration engendered by the cold salt water and the wind.

He slipped his feet into soft outing shoes. Vaguely he recollected that something had troubled him. After the perverse manner of a man's mind he made an effort to remember what it was. Of course! It was Grimshaw! And the thought of Grimshaw carried him back to that moment when the lights flashed on again in Harmon Welsh's card room.

With a sudden alarm he sprang to his feet. How had Jed Grimshaw come through? His face had looked very gray, out there in the bedlam of storm. Where was

he now? Had he survived or had that gray shadow on his face portended death?

He sank into the chair and clutched at his reeling head. If the man died, his sacrifice was for nothing. His hold on a new life gone!

There was a knock at the door.

"Come!" cried Corvan.

It was the quiet, elderly stranger who had brought him up from the beach; who had sent Mrs. Bland scurrying about for hot drinks; who had hurried him upstairs, administered stimulants, and drawn a hot bath for him.

"How are you?" Queritt would have asked, but Corvan fairly pounced upon him.

"Where's Grimshaw?" he cried. "How is he?"

"Grimshaw?" Queritt stood dumfounded. "Who's Grimshaw?"

"The man I brought in! How is he?"

Queritt looked shrewdly at his questioner. How did Corvan, of all other people in this village, know the name of the man he had saved? And "Grimshaw," he had heared that name before!

"I believe they've taken him to the home of the man named Fiske," he said. "I don't know of his condition. But how are you?"

A tremendous blast of wind struck the house making it shiver, and a tree snapped outside with the crack of rifle fire.

"I'm tired," said Corvan simply, and sank back into his chair.

Queritt stood silent for a moment, moved by the extraordinary heroism he had seen, and by the violence of the storm. With his quiet gray eyes, he regarded the man before him.

Corvan sat relaxed in his armchair. Clad in a tennis shirt of lawn, with the loose knickers and tan wool stockings, his trim athletic form gave him that touch of boyishness that accentuates the fineness of manhood. His face was drawn with fatigue and his eyes tired, yet, above the bandage on his forehead, his brown hair was wavy and rebellious from the ministrations of the water, and there was the boyish touch again. Then Corvan's blue eyes, seeing the friendliness of the gray ones that regarded him, broke into a sudden, wholesome smile.

Queritt stepped impulsively forward and offered his hand.

"My name is Bradley Queritt," he said. "I have come to apologize to you."

Corvan shook the man's hand, and would have arisen but the other pressed him back, protesting.

Bradley Queritt! The sucker! The chosen victim of the graft! Corvan stared helplessly before him. Surely the fates were laughing at him now.

He indicated a chair, but Queritt refused it. Instead he stood there, nervously regarding Corvan's face.

"Now what?" reflected Corvan's tired mind.

"Mr. Corvan, I came down to investigate you!" Queritt frowned. "I confess it. I am sorry."

Corvan saw his cue. It was his part to be puzzled,

even a little indignant. He saw his cue, but he could not, for the life of him, take it. He sat silently, expectantly.

"You have no doubt received inquiries lately regarding some stock you own. Turnstile Stores, Inc.?" said Queritt suddenly.

Corvan smiled.

"Yes," he admitted.

"They were from me."

Corvan lifted his eyebrows. Again he ignored a cue.

"Yes. I have an agent, a man named Wade. He informed me—" Queritt broke off. He had been pacing a few steps to and fro. Now he stood still. "Mr. Corvan," he said, "that stock is worth ten dollars a share! You can get that for it on the market. Knowing that, we planned to buy all you hold at a low figure and make a clean-up. We planned to cheat you!"

"But I'd scarcely sell without some profit." Corvan deprecated the other's self-condemnation, but in his mind was a tormenting problem. Accident had brought this sucker to the net under more favorable circumstances than any guile could have created. Why was he not playing up to it? Why did he sit silent before every cue this man gave him for insuring his position, for cinching the grand hurrah?

"And furthermore," insisted the agitated Queritt, "I suspected you. I came down here for the express purpose of spying on you. Of deciding for myself if everything Wade said of you was true . . . I suspected you, Mr. Corvan, even while I was planning to take advantage of you. And I come here to find that

the man I would have cheated, and investigated, is . . . is a gentleman who would give his life to save another." He paused, then, quickly, "I want to tell you that. I want to apologize for that . . ."

His gray eyes were fixed on Corvan with genuine admiration and regret. Corvan smiled a twisted smile. This was irony. This was the humor of the gods. And not the least humorous feature of fate's playfulness was that in the warmth of Queritt's penitence it seemed as if the great graft would fall through.

He knew that it was up to him to save it, and a word would be enough. He need only assure Queritt that he would be glad to sell that stock. That was all. Just a few words.

But they were words that Corvan could not speak. Instead: "Don't, please don't!"

"Don't, please don't!" Was that all he could say? Were those puny, driveling words all that the Great Corvan had with which to meet this situation!

"But it is true," insisted Queritt. "I can't tell you how small, how indescribably petty, I feel in the face of your heroism this morning. I tell you, sir, that was a noble deed! A great deed! And it is the greater for the modesty with which you cover it up.

"I have wronged you, Mr. Corvan, and I apologize. I want to do more. I went into this stock-buying deal without knowing you. Just for the profit. Now I know you, I am more intent than ever on seeing it through. But not for the profit. I desire only the honor of dealing with such a man as you are. Mr. Corvan, I offer

you to-day my certified check for ninety thousand dollars in exchange for your holdings of Turnstile Stores, Inc.!"

Corvan reared himself up in his chair, tossing back his head with the gesture of a prince, and Queritt stood sturdily upon his amazing offer.

But Corvan in that instant was given vision. In that instant it was revealed to him what manner of man he was. What in the heart and the soul he was made of.

He sank back in his chair.

"I can't do it," he said. "I'm sorry but that stock is not for sale!"

"But I don't think you understand—"

Queritt was interrupted by the tinkle of the 'phone. Corvan picked up the connection at his bedside.

"Mr. Corvan . . . Mr. Corvan . . ."

His wholesome smile again played like sunlight on his face. He was listening to the voice of Margaret Fiske.

"The man you saved!" she was crying. "He's unconscious again. I'm afraid he's dying!"

"No!" the cry was a command. "Grimshaw must not die!" And Queritt again felt that thrill of surprise. Who was this Grimshaw, unknown to every one but Corvan? In his elderly way Queritt seemed to feel that he had heard that name before somewhere.

"You have called the doctor?" Corvan's voice was in control now, a vibrant, quiet voice.

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"The wires are down."

"I see." Though his heart sank. "But my car could do it."

"That's why I called. If some one could take your car."

"Very well, we'll do it. Thank you for calling."

"Be quick! Oh, be quick!"

Corvan wondered at her tone. It seemed almost a reflection of his thought.

"Why do you say that?" he asked quickly.

"Because you risked your life. It mustn't be for nothing! Good-by.

She hung up very abruptly.

Corvan swung upon Queritt.

"Can you drive a Renard Six?" he demanded.

"No."

Corvan's lips drew in a tight line across his teeth.

"Then run down and pour me out a brandy straight," he pleaded. "I've got to drive to Brookhampton for a doctor."

"Nonsense! Look at the storm. The roads will be impassable! And you're spent!"

Corvan, struggling into his coat, turned the blazing, irresistable eyes upon him.

"Please!" he cried, and Queritt obeyed.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEMANDS OF THE OCCASION

Feeling his knees weak beneath him, Corvan stumbled as he climbed to the wheel of his long black car.

"You're tired," protested Queritt.

"I'm not walking," grinned Corvan, and he made the engine hum.

"Don't do it!" cried Queritt impulsively. But Corvan made the engine roar and drowned the other's voice. He played expertly with the gears, and the car leaped forward. Queritt's heart bounded into his mouth as he stood outside the garage and saw the machine sweep into the driveway. There was a fence down at the turn into the road and Corvan seemed to head straight for the debris lying in his path. Had he fainted? Was he blind?

With a lightning turn the big car whisked out, the fender grazing the trees at the roadside, and the obstacle was avoided with a whipping of branches against the leather top that Queritt could hear above the increasing clamor of the wind. Then the car swung into the road and passed from sight.

It was a clear, bright day. The sun lit the countryside with a peculiarly intense light that picked out the trees on hilltops, the sloping roofs of dwelling places and

various odd, conspicuous objects of the landscape, making them vivid and memorable. Into this sunlit beauty the tremendous impact of the wind intruded with the terrible incongruity of a ravishing horde. Corvan was conscious of this, and, combined with a weight of weariness that caused him to stare at the road with eyes out of a drawn face, it gave his hurried errand the aspect of a dream. He whirled the car about the curve at the foot of the road, and catching the wind from his side, felt for a moment as if the big machine must be tossed from its track as tumbleweed is flung before the wind. With his body deliberately contending against the pressure of the gale, he wondered at the sure grip of his tires on the gravel. He pressed down upon the pedal that fed his engine and had only room in his mind for the winding highway which leaped toward him, which, to his tired eyes, seemed hungrily to fight the weight and wheels of the car which relentlessly downtrod it.

Suddenly before him a barrier of dunes arose, and the brake bands shrieked in protest as his feet obeyed the swift warning that the road had disappeared. The wind had swept the sand of the dunes and brought it down to the road. Corvan quickly appreciated the situation and releasing his brake before the car had fairly lost its mad momentum, he charged the heaped sand that opposed him. The wheels slid and skidded in the soft white accumulation. It was as though he strove to override a yielding body which with strong hands clung tenaciously to the wheels that mangled it. He shifted his gears and the engine roared frantically while the

wheels whipped up the sand. He moved, and slid sidewise. Like a striving animal the car quivered and roared without headway but with all the promise of potential power.

Corvan ground his teeth together. It was as if quicksand held him and he opposed the grip of it with an almost physical effort. Only one thing beat upon his mind, and it beat with the rushing impact of an eagle's wings. He was out to save the life of a man, and that life had become a symbol and an omen in his mind. He fought with a man who was the great Corvan and he fought to free himself from a net of circumstances, which was his past, that that man threw about him.

The saving of Jed Grimshaw would achieve that freedom for him. He sensed it, he felt it, he knew it. Something stronger than thought convinced him of it and beat like mighty wings within his mind. And the fates opposed him, the elements, and even the earth opposed him. The mightiest wind of a decade cast the very body of the dunes across his way. And the leaden burden of fatigue oppressed him. But he would do it. With grim impatience he bore down on the accelerator and the car, finding sudden traction, shot across the road to bury two wheels in the dune side, just as Corvan caught it up on the emergency, threw it into reverse and avoided upset by a split hair. He whisked it into the road again, ground through a slough of deep sand on low, and feeling hard road beneath his wheels, threw his gears into high, and roared forward once more with leaping, surging speed.

As he plunged out of the sand, he plunged at the same time out of the wind, finding shelter behind the great sand piles that now stood between him and the sea. With the sudden cessation of that tearing, noisy pressure, a great peace fell upon him, and weariness gave way to an exuberation which was joy. He swung madly about the turnings of the road with the sand hissing against his fenders, and the engine throbbing in rich baritone beneath its hood. It appeared that fate had decided to be kind; as if the heart-breaking conditions imposed upon his task were to be alleviated. But appearances were deceptive.

Whizzing past the barrier of dunes at seventy, seventy-five, eighty miles an hour, he could not long rely on their protection, and the end of them came with a blast of wind that set him driving his head sidewise against it, and, flinching at the sting of the sand, which whipped like spray against his face. And again his mind snapped the sharp command that whipped his nerves to instant action; for the road sank before him and fell to the white wooden bridge that spanned the creek.

He had passed that way before, and seen the peaceful beauty of the vivid green meadows, and the rank grass, flower strewn, through which this little stream tumbled to the sea. He knew that in time of peace this bridge was not one to take at racing speed; and now war raged about it. For the sea had come in, breakers with mad whitecaps swept over the sand bar on which the creek was wont to break its waters in fair ripples. They beat at the flimsy structure, sending blasts of spray

dashing across its width. The far end of the bridge could not be seen for the water which obscured it.

With a screaming brake, Corvan brought the car up as the spade bit curbs a maddened horse, and it skidded, sidling down to the bridge like a shy elephant. Then a quick turn of the wheel, and a brake released, permitted it to shoot forward once again, and not until the wheels bit the gravel of the farther side did Corvan know how tensely his nerves had met the certain danger he had risked.

He grinned and, with the wind across his face, sent his car forward. Torn and in conflict of mind and body and soul, the excitement and tense effort of this wild journey alone upheld him. The struggle and the demand that he live to see it through was all that gave him life; and that life he must wager for another. Half measures were not enough. Even now, as he whirled out to avoid the barrier of three telegraph poles that lay, sundered, across the roadway; even as the wheels of his machine whirred in the sandy loam of the roadside and found traction only at the shifting of the gears; even now, Jed Grimshaw might be dying, and Corvan's deliberate gamble of a life which was dark in the past for a life that was bright with promise gone for nothing. He threw the wheel over with an inward snarl at a physical weakness which clutched him, and caught a quick breath at the sight of the roofs and spires of Brookhampton clear in the sunlight before him.

He roared down a main street made treacherous with the debris of unaccountable boughs and branches rent

from the trees by the wind. He whirled and swung this way and that way among them, and shot forward in a space miraculously clear to twist on two wheels into a green side street. It was empty of life, but they who stood anxiously in windows watching the rack of the storm saw the big car come plunging and pitching over and about the obstructions in its way to bring up panting at Doctor Stevens' gate.

He would have leaped from the car, but he stumbled, almost sinking to the ground. He rallied his will and stood erect. His legs felt weak, as though he had been for weeks bedridden. For a moment he leaned upon the door of the car, then commanding his nerves to his obedience, he turned to the gate and strode up the pathway. In the supremacy of his effort he had seen nothing, and knew nothing of his surroundings, but after a few paces, he felt himself again, and looking up, found that the doctor had emerged from the house and stood in the pathway before him.

Fatigue forgotten, Corvan hurried forward. He did not know what an extraordinary figure he appeared. His face was drawn with fatigue, the bandage upon his head was all awry, and the beating of the wind upon his face suffused it with a red and angry flush. His mind held only one thought, and that was for Grimshaw. The wretched Grimshaw must be saved; his work must be made complete. And that showed in his eyes which were haggard and deep-sunken. He sprang at the doctor with a peculiar fierceness. It was the expression of the desire which obsessed him.

"Come with me!" he cried. "Get your tools and come. There's a man dying down at the point!"

Doctor Stevens stared at him as though Corvan were a maniac.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Dying! Don't you hear?" Corvan glanced into the doctor's eyes, furiously impatient. "You've got to come, and come quick. Hurry! The engine's running. Come quick!" He grasped the doctor's arm and shoved him roughly toward his door.

"But you're mad!" cried Stevens impatiently. He had not forgotten the humiliation imposed upon him by this stranger; and he was not accustomed to obeying such peremptory commands as Corvan now snapped forth.

"Don't stand and argue!" snapped Corvan. "Get your things and come! I tell you a man is dying! Isn't that what you're here for?"

"I'm here to take care of the people in such a time of danger as this!" answered the doctor hotly. "I can't dash off with every madman who comes assaulting me like a frightened child! Calm down!"

For answer Corvan gripped him by one arm, and leaned forward fiercely, peering into the other's face. His voice was thick with the fury of desperation. There was a thought beating in his mind.

"Shut up!" he said, "and come. You're a doctor. Its your duty, and by God, I'll see that you obey it!"

The doctor tore himself away.

"You're crazy!" he cried, and turning, made haste for his doorway.

He passed through, but Corvan had literally pounced forward.

"There's the car!" he cried. "Now get your effects, and come!"

Stevens drew back. He divined then that Corvan was not mad; that there was a driving purpose in his mind. But the turmoil of the wind and the obsession visible in Corvan's eyes made him hold back.

"The roads are impassable!" he stammered.

"I've just passed them!" snapped Corvan grimly. "For God's sake, stop your blathering and come, or I'll break you! I'll sue you, by Heaven, if that man dies!"

Stevens cast a wavering look into Corvan's burning eyes.

"I'll come," he faltered. His voice quavered with his emotion. "But if there is no need, you'll suffer for this, Mr. Corvan."

He gathered his case and coat and hat together, Corvan following him with unwavering eyes; and then Stevens was seized in an iron grasp and violently dragged down the pathway to the car. Corvan well nigh threw him in like so much baggage, and springing across his body, slid under the wheel.

"Wait!" cried Stevens, "I've forgotten—" But what he had forgotten was never known, for, with a roar that drowned his voice, the car plunged forward and he was hurled backward in his seat.

CHAPTER XXVII

BREAKING AWAY

They swept up to the rise from which Corvan had first seen the village. There the wind assaulted them, an active force which seemed bound to tear them from their places; which seemed to contend even with the weight of the great car that gallantly clove through it. Stevens cowered before it, crouching low at Corvan's side, clapping his hands to his ears to shut out the impact against his ear drums. Corvan sat erect. To challenge this riotous element was his only chance, he felt. To give way to it, to cower before its crushing onslaughts would be to cringe before fate. And Corvan was out to prove that, over fate, he was the master.

From the top of the rise they could see the white road unfolded before them, could see it disappear into curves and hollows that seemed ineffably removed, and reappear once more in distant glimpses that seemed unattainable. To Corvan the surmounting of that rise meant something more. It meant that, around that corner toward which they leaped, there lay a barrier of fallen poles. He skidded the corner and to the doctor's horror leaped from the road to plunge across soft loam that threatened to hurl the car end over end as it caught the spinning wheels. And then, on two wheels, they turned in again. They

had passed the barrier, and Corvan with his lips drawn back from his teeth, challenged fate again with all the speed of the monster that throbbed beneath his pressing foot.

They whizzed past dune and fence and screening hedges which leaned before the wind as if to stop their wild career. The unfortunate doctor alternately wrung his hands in his lap and clutched frantically at the seat with them. Sometimes he would glance furtively before him, or gaze fascinated at the littered road which swept into their faces. Corvan recklessly disregarded such small debris as the car could thunder through, and Stevens gasped with dismay at the lurch and jolt of the big machine as it bounced over branches or littering fence rails. Occasionally it veered and skidded with some debris beneath the wheel, and Corvan, with a quick hand, turned into the skid. As they swerved and twisted from one side of the road to the other, the doctor frowned with fear, and the car seemed to stop short with a grinding jolt as a branch of tenuous birch caught in the wheels. The wheels held and the branch gave noisily. The car shot forward again. Stevens gathered himself from a heap on the floor of the car.

"You'll kill us!" he cried. "You'll kill us both!" But the man beside him was silent with bared teeth.

He would get through! There was nothing in the world could stand in his way! The wind and the storm could not stop him. Fear of death or the challenge of fate could not hold him back. He would save Jed Grim-

shaw's life—that miserable, useless life. He would get through. It was ordained.

And he came to the creek that ran down to the sea. The creek where the sea dashed high at the bridge. *And the bridge was gone!*

Stevens did not at first realize it. He thought that they had lost the road, and this madman was going to plunge them both from the sand dunes into the raging sea.

"Stop! stop!" he shouted.

And Corvan stopped, turning the car so that it buried a single wheel in the sand that banked the road. Stevens then appreciated that they were on the road but that the bridge had gone.

"We can't go on!" he cried. And a load of fear was lifted from his heart. They couldn't go on now.

But Corvan had viewed this dilemma with the eyes of resolution. He saw that they could not cross the creek where the bridge had been, and the soft meadows which lay over the bank whereon his front wheels rested were impassable for his heavy car, even if it could have surmounted that acclivity of softest sand. But where the creek ran into the sea was a sand bar; and the hard sand of that bar was covered deep with a shingle of hard round stones; and the water was shallow. A riot of breakers dashed upon the bar now; piled and broke one upon the other, and made high sport before the wind. Corvan thought fast. His Renard Six should be able to buck those waters. With firm shingle beneath its wheels it should be able to make little of them.

He tore the wheels about with all the strength of his

arms, and touched the wounded monster into life. The doctor gripped the side of his seat again. Was the madman turning back? His soul melted into despair as Corvan set the car at the sandy waste on the outside of the road, and, passing it with lurching slowness, turned, with a roaring engine, sliding, struggling wheels toward the open sea!

Again Stevens clutched Corvan's arm and strove to pitch his voice above the thunder of the engine. Corvan flung him from his side; and Stevens could do nothing but cover up his eyes from the death which seemed impending.

With intolerable deliberation the car scrambled over the myriad round stones that became deep upon the beach. But as the front wheels entered the water, which surged about the mouth of the creek, the sand beneath the shingles became firm, and the gallant monster moved forward. It breasted the breakers with a force that had never encountered them before, and Corvan, racing his engine, prayed that the salt water might not engulf the hood. It didn't. It dashed sidewise upon the arrogant machine, and seemed intent upon shivering, tossing it upon its side and inundating it. But the very power which had overswept the bar with sea had piled stones upon stones, so that the bar was higher and the water more shallow than ever before. Corvan saw that, while the spray dashed high against the metal sides, which gallantly opposed it, the height of the water scarce reached above his hubs. For a moment, which seemed eternal, the great machine fought against the strangest element

that ever motor car encountered, and fought, too, the shifting shingle beneath its wheels. Then, with a sudden access of life, it sprang forward, and before Corvan could control its mighty power, it leaped free from the water to a beach that was floored with heaped rock like newly macadamized road.

When the doctor again surveyed the world, Corvan was rocking at a wheel, which strained in his hands, as the car rolled over the rocky shore in an oblique line toward the road. It was no time to consider the welfare of the machine and Corvan gradually pressed his engine into greater speed. Terribly the monster lurched and swung about, and it regained the road from a rocky shelf with a sickening jolt that brought forth from beneath them a loud report, and a thud that well nigh split the doctor's spine. Without pausing, Corvan swung the car into the road and the wild ride was continued with rough jolting. It seemed as if the machine was sliding bumping wheeless over a rutted road.

"We're wrecked!" cried Stevens, in an agony of consternation.

"Rear spring's gone!" growled Corvan. A sickness within him warned him that this journey must soon end or he collapse.

So he pressed his car to all it had, and winced at the pounding in the engine's roar which showed that the machine was as nearly spent as he. Still the speedometer climbed to sixty, sixty-five—but that was all. Then a sudden cessation of the wind's hard pressure recalled an adventure which seemed to have happened

years ago. He was in the peace of the sheltering dunes, and he knew that in an instant he would be up to his hubs in sand. He threw on the brake. And it failed to hold. He pulled upon the emergency and threw out his clutch. In a skid that flung him full weight upon the wheel, they swept about the turn, and stopped fast in the sand with their back to the course they pursued. With quick hands and a hysterical laugh at the luck thus given him, Corvan threw his gears into reverse, and they struggled with a power that drew sweat from his forehead, and caused him to manipulate quickly and desperately a wheel that fought against his hand. With his head twisted back, he forged with his monster through the sand pit and swung out on to hard gravel to face about and press on again, with his blanched and despairing companion at his elbow.

As they drove forth into the wind again, the doctor's hat flew from his head, and Corvan instinctively crouched down. The velocity of the gale was terrific, and he breathed a mute thanksgiving when a turn in the road placed the wind behind them, and they found themselves faced by the long straight stretch of highway that approached the village. With his cut-out open he roared down the stretch at breakneck speed. He saw the driveway to his manor go past as dead leaves fly in the wind. He swung his battered, wounded car past the trim fence which now lay, broken by the tempest, on the footpath that fringed the swamp.

His mind flew back to the morning, years ago, when he had met Margaret Fiske beside that fence, and he

was glad, more glad than thought could comprehend, that he had seen this labor through. He noticed the sign in the post-office window which announced that an auction was to be held. That was her work, too.

At the village corner where he must turn into the road where lay her home, a barn was down; a rambling shack had collapsed across the roadway. He made his turn and would have whisked about that obstacle with a skill that was not diminished by a growing weakness within him, but, as he swung out, a tire burst, and the roar of the explosion was lost in the thunder of a crash as the machine hurtled across the road like a toy flung from the hand of a child. Corvan was thrown clear, and he scrambled to his feet, to see the mangled wreckage of the car, which lay in the heaped debris of the fallen building, leap into flames as the red-hot engine met the flowing fuel. The doctor was crawling on his hands and knees, scrambling frantically in the debris to avoid the fire, and Corvan rushed to his side, stumbling over the broken wood which gave beneath his feet. With an arm that was strong with a superhuman strength, he dragged Stevens, like a sack, from danger. And as he whisked the doctor on to the open road, the gasoline, drenching the piled wood, whereon the doctor had so fatuously scrambled, painted it with the color of flame that burned red as the high wind caught it.

Corvan stood with the doctor at his side and saw the flame spread with dreadful haste over the wreckage. It leaped before the wind without rising, but its red anger was unmistakable in its menace. It seemed to

Corvan as though the furies of hell had been unleashed to contend with him, and it was fitting that this last element of fire had been piled upon the forces that he had had to overcome. It had been flung in his way by fate as a last shot is fired at an enemy that cannot be repulsed. And he had overcome it.

He saw men rushing toward the burning pile, and knew that they were moved by fear that it might spread. He saw the doctor standing dazed beside him, clutching heroically an instrument case to save, which he had nearly burned alive and he knew that the man was intent upon the narrowness of his escape. But for himself, he could think of neither the spreading fire nor the peril which had just miraculously passed him by. A persistent thought was beating in his mind. A central, all-possessing thought. Was Grimshaw still alive? He must hurry, hurry.

"We were in that!" the doctor cried. He was sick with the thought of what might have been.

"Come on!" cried Corvan. "He's dying!" And he grasped the doctor by the arm as the approaching men bore down upon them. He fairly dragged the doctor down the road toward the home of Margaret Fiske, and became conscious, for the first time, as he turned up that familiar path, of the blood that trickled down his face from the wound reopened. The bandage had ripped off.

Conscious, too, of an approaching faintness, he hastened his stumbling steps, and brought the doctor to the

door as Queritt swung it open from within, and Margaret appeared.

"Here he is!" uttered Corvan. "The doctor! I've brought him!" And he pushed Stevens forward. Then he reeled and would have fallen had not Queritt passed an arm about his shoulders, and Maddox done the same.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GREAT CORVAN

Corvan pushed the sustaining arms away. With his eyes fixed on Margaret's face, he crossed the room unaided, feeling that his feet did not touch the floor. He leaned against the back of a chair, and when Margaret approached him he smiled and shook his head. A thought was beating upon his mind, and he gasped in short, quick breaths, striving to articulate that thought. The doctor scurried forward with instinctive ministration, but he pushed the little man away. At the doorway Queritt stood, watching. Watching with shrewd bright eyes; and listening. And Maddox, his face comically long with consternation, stood and stared. Thus the room seemed to Corvan to stand still for a moment, and then, leaning against the friendly chair with one arm, and with the other pressing the doctor from him, he found words.

"Where is he?" He shot the question directly at the girl. "Grimshaw!"

"In there." She motioned to another room.

"Then go in there!" roared Corvan into the doctor's face. "That's what you're here for! Go in there, don't bother about me!" He spoke angrily, impatiently.

The doctor looked about him doubtfully. Margaret,

doubtful as well, had her eyes fixed on Corvan's drawn, bloodstained face.

"Take him in. . . . Please!" Corvan appealed to her. "He mustn't die!"

Margaret caught instantly the thought which beat upon his mind.

"Come," she cried to the doctor, and both of them disappeared into the room where Grimshaw, half conscious, fought death feebly, his bloated face aflame with fever.

"God, chief! You're all in!" Maddox came to his side, and turned the chair, upon the back of which Corvan was leaning. But Corvan did not drop into its inviting depths. He stood gazing at the door through which Stevens and the girl had passed.

"I did it," he said. "I got him here! Lord, what a nightmare!"

Outside there was a great shouting as the men of the village piled sand on the blazing wood, and the wind rattled in the windows. Queritt stood silent, watching. There was something in this man's relation to Grimshaw which Queritt could not understand. His alert, inquisitive mind played nimbly with the problem and was at the same time profoundly moved by the heroism he had witnessed.

"Where's some water?" asked Corvan suddenly. Maddox hovered about him, clumsily solicitous.

"In the kitchen!" he cried. "I'll get it."

Corvan laughed, and turned toward the kitchen door.

"I'll go," he said. "Don't stand staring at me as if

I were a corpse. I'm tired, that's all. I want a wash."

Maddox moved with him toward the kitchen.

Margaret appeared in the doorway of the other room.

"We need help," she announced.

Corvan swung toward her, but Queritt was before him.

"You're tired," he smiled, and followed the girl into the room. Corvan dizzily proceeded on his way.

Maddox watched him as he dashed the cold water over his face, gripping the edge of the sink tightly with one hand.

"You ought to lie down," he protested. "Take it easy, chief."

Corvan took the towel which Maddox proffered and wiped his face, dealing gingerly with that part of his forehead where the cut was. His whole face felt raw and hot from the beating of the wind.

"No," he said, "I'll rest . . . but I've got to see this thing through first."

Returning to the living room he sank into the big armchair. He sat there, relaxed, with his eyes fixed hungrily on the door beyond which Grimshaw lay. Maddox hoped that, since Corvan would not lie down, he might fall asleep there in the chair; but he did not know the thought that beat on Corvan's mind. Corvan was suspended upon the life that struggled for existence behind that wooden door. If Grimshaw lived, he felt that he, too, would live, a stronger, finer man. If Grimshaw died . . . Corvan was incapable of foreseeing what Grimshaw's death would mean. It seemed as though it would

mean not less than death for him, *himself*. To Corvan, Grimshaw had become a symbol.

With his hands clutching at the arms of the chair, and chin dropped upon his chest, Corvan gazed at the door. It was in his heart to invade that room, and take his part in restoring the man to life. But two things prevented. He dared not discover for himself how near to death the miserable man might be; and he was not equal to the exertion. He was tired; every cell of his body cried for rest, and the overwrought nerves of his limbs twitched with the aching fatigue that afflicted him. Saving that aching fatigue, his body was as inert as death. He could only sit there with the obsession in his mind prohibiting sleep.

Maddox stood silently for a space and gazed through the window at the men who fought the fire. But Maddox could not be still for long, and his mind, too, had its persistent and incredible burden. He slowly approached the chair where Corvan sat.

"Say, chief," he spoke gingerly, timidly, "say, that guy, that Queritt, he's the sucker."

"Well?" Corvan looked up quickly, causing Maddox to drop his gaze.

"Well, it's like this." Maddox felt that perhaps he might have chosen a better time, but the words had been at the tip of his tongue too long. "He comes to me and says that he wanted to . . . to buy . . . that . . . you know . . . that stock."

"Yes." The tired eyes searched Maddox through and through. The tone of Corvan's voice was a familiar one. It was laden with the cold note that Maddox dreaded. "He has spoken to me about it."

"Sure, he told me. And he says that you turned him down!"

Maddox was frankly incredulous.

"What's that to you?" asked Corvan.

"Why. . . . " Maddox's gaze was comically aghast. "I didn't believe it."

Corvan drew his brows together. A savage glitter entered his eyes. His thoughts had been so far from the projected graft that he had well-nigh forgotten it as the concrete embodiment of the forces he contested. This reminder of it aroused a snarl within his breast.

"It's true," he snapped. "I turned him down!"

"But. . . . " Maddox faltered. "But, chief . . . it's the graft! And he says he begged you to take it!"

"He did. But I was too busy at the time," Corvan grinned significantly, "on something else."

"But you're goin' to do it later?"

Corvan arose from his chair and stood stiffly erect.

"I'm not going to do it at all," he said.

Maddox was limp as a monk in the face of Beelzebub. He stood open-mouthed, incredulous.

"But you can't turn it down. There's Wade! You're Corvan!"

Corvan grinned.

"Sure. Corvan. The man who was the smoothest swindler in the game! The man who could take a fortune away from a sucker, like candy is taken from a baby. I'm Corvan, Maddox!" he cried; and he stepped foward with a fist clenched upon the table, driving his message into the other's heart with the fire of his eyes. "I'm Corvan, the man who has wiped all that slime out of his own life by saving the life of another! . . . God help me!" He sank to the chair again and his head fell forward into his folded arms upon the table.

CHAPTER XXIX

GRIMSHAW IS COMPLETELY SAVED

That appeal, that cry for help which had burst from Corvan's lips as his head sank into his arms, was the confession of a doubt which had smoldered in his mind. As the men outside heaped sand upon the wind-fanned flame, so he had smothered that doubt whenever it leapt up within his mind. Maddox had forced from his lips the first articulate statement of the fact which pressed upon him; and with the bold declaration of his claim to a new life, which Grimshaw's salvation would establish, came the doubt which lay within the knowledge that Grimshaw was not yet saved. His effort might still go for nothing. His fight might yet be all in vain. Behind that door the wretched object of his contention might even now be dying . . . or dead.

"Jeese!" cried Maddox, driven to distraction.

"It can't be! It would be too cruel!" murmured Corvan. Shutting the world from his sight he pressed the doubt from him.

The door of the sick room opened and Margaret stepped into the room. She had obviously been working under a great strain, mental and physical, but her face was bright and she stepped from the door-

way apparently with bright words on her lips. Then her face fell woefully, for her eyes had fallen upon the bowed head of Corvan. Thinking he had fainted, she caught her breath in a murmur of dismay, and crossed to the chair on which he sat.

"Oh, my dear!" she murmured, and her hand touched his head.

So that Corvan, feeling himself alone with his despairing thoughts, was aroused by the touch of her hand upon his hair, and the far-off sound of her voice. He drew up his head, and gazed upon her with wonder in his eyes. He seemed to see across an abyss with thin mists obscuring his sight. With an arm upon the arm of his chair he pulled himself up, half standing, and searched her eyes with the terrible gaze of spiritual fear.

"He . . . is he . . . dead?" His voice was terribly firm.

She looked at him, puzzled and alarmed.

"You are ill," she murmured.

"No, not ill, tired. I am only tired. But tell me, is he dead?"

Again she sensed the thought that oppressed his mind, and her face shone with a smile.

"No," she cried. "I came to call you in. He is better. The doctor says that he will live."

"*Live!*" He stood alone and erect, his face shining with an unearthly light. "Live! Ah, Maddox, do you hear that? He will live!"

With fatigue and doubt forgotten he went with

her to the door of the sick room. Maddox, incapable of speech or thought, saw them go side by side; saw them cross the room away from him, she to stand with her hand upon the door knob, while he spoke to her. Then, feeling that this place was, peculiarly, no place for him, he slipped through the front door and took himself off. They did not notice his departure.

"I want," Corvan was saying, "I want to see him alone. I want to be alone with him."

The door opened and the doctor came out.

"He will live?" cried Corvan.

"With good care, he'll live," he said briefly. "His body is shot to pieces with bad living. Organically, I mean."

"Can I see him alone?" asked Corvan.

The doctor, standing in the doorway, nodded.

The doctor looked surprised.

"Why, yes," he said. "You've saved this man's life, Mr. Corvan. He's yours if ever one man belonged to another. I thought you were mad when you drove me down here, and I was frightened to death. If I had ever known. . . . Well I must apologize. By all means come in and see him alone."

They entered the room together. The bed lay over against the far wall. At the head of it stood Margaret's mother, patient at the post she had assumed since first the derelict was brought to her home. Queritt stood at the foot of the bed, obscuring Corvan's sight of the invalid. The doctor hurried forward.

"Mr. Corvan would like to see the patient for a moment alone," he said. "I have told him he may."

Queritt looked up with his quick, inquisitive shrewdness.

"Of course," he said. He had remembered where he had heard Grimshaw's name before.

Corvan stood gravely in the doorway while they passed him by. He stood gravely leaning upon the doorpost. And after the last of them had gone, he closed the door with the quick, eager gesture of a man who would be alone with a mystery. He approached the bed. The form that lay upon that bed was the salvaged wreckage of a life, and it belonged to him, for he had salvaged it. He desired to look upon it, to see it live and breathe before his eyes. To see some recognition in those eyes of the fact that he had at last achieved the fulfillment of his freedom. That he could now start his life anew.

Grimshaw's wasted, puffy face was afire with the red signal flag of fever, and he lay with glazed eyes, breathing stertorously in breaths that were moans. Corvan looked down on the man's face. He advanced to the head of the bed and leaned over Grimshaw's pillow, striving to catch the slightest hint of conscious recognition in those burning, glassy eyes.

And Grimshaw returned his gaze. For a long moment Grimshaw stared with his apparently unseeing eyes at the face which peered into his own. Then consciousness dawned in the bloated face, and recogni-

tion in his eyes. His lips writhed over his broken teeth as he strove for speech.

"Corvan!" he snarled, and strained his head from the pillow. He was remembering the elegant and dominating voice that had forced him with threats to do its service. Fear and hatred contorted his face. "Corvan! You—" obscene vituperation oozed from his lips like a foul substance. "What d' hell are you doing here?"

Corvan's weight was heavy on his arm as he supported himself on the bedpost.

"Grimshaw!" he cried. "You're better! You're going to live!" A high-pitched laugh—hysteria—filled his throat. He overcame it. "You're going to live!" he gasped.

"Where d' hell am I?"

"Here! Here! In the house of Margaret—"

His words died on his lips. He had saved this miserable derelict. He had risked death that he might win something finer than his life. And all he had achieved was to bring this thing, from the dregs of the gutter, to lay it at her feet. To lay it in her home.

"You're in her house, Grimshaw!" he cried. "But, by heaven, if you spill a single word of the foulness that you come from, I'll drag you out of here like a mongrel dog, and throw you back into the sea again!"

The madness of fear then rose in Grimshaw's face. He pulled himself up on the bed. He cried out.

"For Christ's sake!" he shrieked; and the doctor

came rushing in. Margaret and her mother followed, and Queritt.

Grimshaw, dazed, glared into the many faces, then, overcome, sank back upon the pillow to maunder deliriously. Margaret bent over him.

"Let him be!" cried the doctor. "And renew those cold applications."

Again the ministering hands were busy, and the men and women worked silently upon the muttering patient. The doctor worked intent upon the job in hand; Queritt played with the new problem in his shrewd quick mind; Margaret's mother did her appointed tasks with a solicitude which knew no discrimation and Margaret herself brought the cold, wet applications with the consciousness that Corvan had left the room. As soon as she could she followed him.

He was lying full length upon the couch. His eyes were closed, and there was a smile upon his face. She walked over to the couch and looked down upon him. He was asleep.

"Mine," she said softly. "You are mine." And yet, said her mind, how could she claim him? A country girl, the daughter of a farmer who could not even call this home his own. A girl without education or position; even, she reflected, with a sad smile, a homeless girl. And he was as far above her little, uncultured world as a legendary prince. He was rich, and—yes—noble. More noble than any human being she had ever known. Surely, in that faraway

rich world of the city from which he came, there were women of his own kind, who loved him too? She caught up her thought with a queer little choking laugh. Why had she said that to herself? Why had she thought of love? He was noble and great and splendid, she must not dare to say such a thing to herself again, not even in unspoken thought, in deepest privacy. And yet . . . there must be others who loved him, too. Loved him better. Loved him more.

No! That wasn't possible! None of them could have seen him as she had seen him. None of them could know him as she knew him. There was the boy, Harold Trench, to bind him to her. There was this wretched man who lay sick in the other room. No other woman in the world could share what she had shared with him. . . . In her heart she knew that, when he had gone into the surf to save that life, hers had been the eyes into which he had last looked. When he went out on that wild, brave ride, hers had been the voice which had sent him. He was hers!

She fell to her knees beside his couch and touched his hair. She let one hand lie lightly on his shoulder. He moaned in his sleep, and groped for that light hand. His unconscious grasp closed upon it.

"Mine!" she murmured. "You are mine!" And ever so lightly she pressed a kiss upon his cheek.

Then she slipped her hand from his and sprang erect. Some one was at the door. She ran to open it

but Sally Martin entered before she reached the threshold.

"Margaret!" she cried. "Isn't it grand!" Her eyes fell upon the recumbent form, and she hushed her voice. "He's the greatest man . . . the only real hero I've ever seen!" she whispered.

"Miss Fiske." The doctor was calling from the inner room.

"What is it, Sally? I must go," whispered Margaret hurriedly.

"This. Tom was over at our house just now. He was so excited—"

"Who's Tom?"

Sally blushed.

"Mr. Maddox," she confessed. "He was over at the house, and he's so excited it seemed like he's almost crazy. He gave me this letter and asked me to give it to you. See, it's for Mr. Corvan, and Tom, Mr. Maddox, says that you're to give it to him. Nobody else." She handed Margaret a sealed envelope.

"Very well," Margaret could not conceal her pleasure that she had been chosen for this intimate service. She liked Maddox for it. "I'll leave it here, on the table and give it to him as soon as he wakes up." She placed the envelope on the table, propping it up against the lamp.

"Miss Fiske!" called the doctor's voice.

"I must go," whispered Margaret. She smiled brightly at the girl who turned to the door again, and then answered the doctor's call.

CHAPTER XXX

THE WISDOM OF QUERITT

Corvan awoke. It was night, and he stared out into a blackness that was relieved by an oasis of light which shone upon the covered table in the center of the room. He lay and fixed his eyes upon this light. Inasmuch as his eyes were open and he saw the light, he was awake; inasmuch as his body was as feelingless as death, and his mind devoid of thought, he was still asleep. Then he observed that another light invaded the darkness of the room. It seeped in through a crack which was the slightly opened door of the sick room. For a moment his eyes dwelt there, and then came back to the table. He noticed that the lamp shade had been covered with newspaper, and he smiled. He suspected whose hands had done that service to shield his eyes from the glare. And there were two figures sitting in the chairs on either side of the table. Overcoming his inertia, he arose on one elbow, and saw that the doctor was one of these and the other Queritt. The doctor slept, but Queritt was awake.

His attention caught by a little noise which Corvan's movement had made, Queritt turned in his chair. Seeing Corvan awake, and regarding him, he arose.

"Lord," he said, "it's been a hard day."

Corvan arose to a sitting posture. He winced as his stiff limbs reminded him of their fatigue.

"Yes," he said. "I know it. How's Grimshaw?"

Queritt's shrewd glance searched the young man's face.

"Sleeping quietly. Miss Fiske is with him. She is a splendid nurse."

Corvan's face lit up.

"Yes, a splendid woman. I tell you I didn't know what unselfishness was until I met her!" He spoke with great warmth. "I'm glad Grimshaw is better," he said more calmly.

"You seem very concerned about this man," murmured Queritt.

"Why not? You can't do things by halves. I set out to save that man, and I had to see it through."

"How did you know his name was Grimshaw?" Queritt's voice was very quiet, friendly, and his eyes smiled. But Corvan felt a warning that was part of the man he had left behind. Since the wreck on the bar that morning his mind had not heard that inner voice of caution and guile, which had guided the Great Corvan in his work. Hearing it now, his face became masked, and behind the mask his mind worked with lightning craft.

"How did I—"

"Yes," smiled the little man before him. "That man was brought up on the beach unconscious and no one knew his name. Yet when you yourself came round,

you asked after the welfare of Grimshaw. I thought it a peculiar thing. That's all."

"It is a peculiar thing."

"Yes, very. It struck my mind with a peculiar emphasis, because it happens that you are not the first person I have heard mention this man's name."

Corvan's expression did not change. Only a slight tightening of the muscles about his mouth betrayed his vital interest in the other man's remark.

"Naturally. The whole village knows his name now."

"I said the first! The gentleman who consented to act as my agent in the matter of buying your stock was called upon the telephone last Friday when I happened to be in his office. I heard him acknowledge the name of the man who called him. It was Grimshaw. A peculiar coincidence, I think."

Something of irony entered Corvan's smile.

"And in short, you are not so keen to do business with me as before?"

Queritt dismissed the suggestion with a gesture.

"Nothing was further from my mind!" he exclaimed. And he spoke sincerely. The coincidence, suspicious as it was, interested him chiefly as a phase in the study of a man. He was intent upon uncovering what was to him the fascinating mystery of Corvan.

"It doesn't matter," said Corvan's tired voice. "There is no consideration in the world now that can persuade me to sell that stock."

"You mean it?"

"I mean it."

The doctor, awakened by their voices, joined Queritt before the couch. He addressed Corvan bluntly, earnestly.

"Well, you saved this man's life, Mr. Corvan," he said. "I have heard the details as they have been told to Grimshaw this evening, and I know that you saved his life twice at the risk of your own. The fact that it wasn't worth saving makes the act the finer. I want to say that I acted the coward and poltroon in that mad ride you brought me on, and I'm ashamed of myself. Will you shake hands with me?"

Corvan took his hand and shook it heartily.

Before Queritt's eyes there flashed a panorama of the heroism and self-sacrifice he had witnessed that day. He, too, in the presence of Corvan, felt small, and rather ashamed.

"Remember," he said in a low voice, "if you ever change your mind, I am still in the market. I want to buy that stock from you. It will square accounts with my mind."

"Square accounts?"

"Yes. I owe you a certain . . . atonement."

Corvan laughed.

"Now I'll take another look at our patient," said the doctor. "And if you'll be so kind," he turned to Queritt, "I'll let you drive me home as you suggested."

"At your service," chirped Queritt. "It's a bor-

rowed flivver, but we won't have to depend on the main road with it, as Corvan did."

They passed into the sick room, and Corvan accompanied them. Grimshaw lay snoring in a peaceful but repellent vision of slumber. Margaret was there and Corvan stood beside her at the head of the bed, looking down upon the invalid. It didn't seem much to have saved, but, as Corvan turned from the bed to the girl, who stood beside him, he read in her eyes the sum of his achievement. He read in her eyes freedom from the thrall of the devils that had occupied his life before.

The doctor, finishing his examination, left with a few words of instruction and a promise to be back on the morrow. Queritt accompanied him, and Corvan stood on the porch listening to the hum of the little car as it bore them away. When he entered the room again, she was standing in the arrested light beside the table. Clean and beautiful she was, in the golden glamour of the lamplight. And his heart arose within him and pounded exultantly. They were alone. He was alone in the presence of a power that led him from the depths to the clean height of manhood. The power that had proved to him he was indeed a man.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SECOND LETTER

He faced her and closed the door behind him. He stood with his hand on the knob behind his back.

"Well. . . ." His face was alive with an exultation he could not subdue. "We did it!"

With a faint uneasiness, and yet with certain gladness, she remembered the moment when he slept, and she had knelt beside his couch. She, too, felt the loneliness of this encounter. It caused a voice within her to cry out. The voice of eternal womanhood which urged her to run away. But she would not run away. She divined that the panic in her was the natural affection of her sex, and she would affect nothing before him.

"*You* did it!" she corrected him. "I have never seen a man who could fight against difficulties as you have done to-day. It seemed impossible. It seemed as though an evil power was bent upon making him die." The tone of her voice changed as suddenly she turned directly upon him with firm and proud conviction. "He *would* have died, if you had not been here! No other man could have saved him!"

He stepped forward so that he stood close to her. He grasped the winged chair that stood beside the

table, and turned it about. He did not take his eyes from her face as he did it.

"Sit down—here," he said. She obeyed him and where she sat the glow of the lamplight illumined her face with an amber warmth of color. It accentuated the warm youth that flooded the firm curves of her cheek and lips. It caught her eyes and filled them with light. He leaned back against the table and regarded her.

"You are very beautiful!" were the words that ran silently in his mind. "You are very clean and wholesome, and desirable. Life has never brought me in touch before with anything comparable to you."

"I want to talk with you," he said aloud.

"Don't forget that I have a patient to nurse," she reminded him. "I ought to be in there now."

"He is sleeping. He can wait." Yes, she was very beautiful. In the lamp light. With her eyes gazing upward. At him.

"I want you to understand one certain thing," he told her; and he knew that he was talking as though to himself, quietly, with a deep conviction that could not be gainsaid. "I don't think that we can go on together—knowing one another—until it is made clear. Until you accept it. For it is the truth."

"This sounds very serious." Her light voice was belied by the shade of puzzlement which lurked in her eyes.

"It is serious. Once upon a time—Lord, it seems like years ago—I came to you and said that you

had done a good thing. And you had. You had sent an idiot boy away to be cured of an affliction which robbed him of his mind, and made him a new man. And you threw the words back at me. 'It was you,' you insisted. And now you have done that again." He rose from his position at the table and stood erect before her. She opened her lips, breathing the prelude to a protest, but he stopped her. "For it was you only, you alone, the bright brave spirit of you who did these things. For some reason, which I cannot guess and cannot even contemplate, I have been chosen to be your instrument, but that is all. That is all the part I have played. All the virtue for which I can take credit. It is all. . . . But it is more than the world to me! . . . Your instrument!" He threw out his hands a little with a gesture of glad renunciation, and she could not mistake the ringing sincerity of his voice when he stepped forward with one pace that caused him to loom above her. "Once and for all, Margaret. I want you to understand that truth!"

She arose from her chair almost as if drawn by a power which he wielded.

"That is like you!" she murmured. "It is like you to give to another the credit, and the praise. And I'm glad. I am glad that you refuse to play the hero, for it makes you nobler and finer. But I'm glad for another reason as well! Shall I tell you what it is? The light in her eyes might have spoken for her then, but, filled with the emotion that gave her

eyes their light, her clear voice hurried on. "It is this: I have thought again and again since I saw you go out into that terrible sea that the last look you turned to the shore was the look that you gave to me. And when you drove off on that ride for the doctor I stayed here and feared for you; but I remembered that when you set out you had my voice in your ears. There! I have said it now! I know that you come from a place where people are different from us. And I know that you've always been as noble and brave as we have seen you here. But when you go back there you can remember that there is one girl in a tiny country village who has seen you go out to death with the look of your eyes in hers. . . . And the memory of it will always make me . . . make me happy!"

She drew away from him; drew away into the shadow, for there was a new brightness in her eyes that she could not suffer him to see. He perceived those tears, however, and they filled him with shame, for he knew that he was not worthy of them. He followed her; stood close beside her, and blurted forth his message in her ear.

"Margaret!" he murmured. "You can't know what you are saying. It isn't true that there has ever been in the life of a man an influence like yours!"

She turned upon him with halting, fearful happiness.

"What do you mean by that?" she whispered.

"That this 'nobility,' this 'braveness,' of which you

speak, is nothing of the past in me. It is you. Haven't I said it before? Can't you understand me? Won't you listen? It is you! You alone.

"I came here from a world that I cannot bear to hear you mention. That cannot be associated with you. And an idiot boy fell at my feet in a fit. I saw him fall. I saw the hideous scene which made him fall. And like the cad I was, I am, I turned away. Walked around the scene as though it were too foul for me to touch. And then you came. I saw you come from that house like an angel. Like a spirit. And you flew to the boy with a loving kindness I had never seen before. I was ashamed. And . . . you know the rest. The boy was sent away to be made new . . . and it was your doing!

"Since then I have struggled like a man possessed with an evil being tearing at the soul inside him. I have tried to regain and hold firm a place in that other world, a place unmentionable, and low. And while I struggled you were at my elbow with a thousand suggestions of simple, kindly things I might achieve. I did them. You must grant me that. I did them. Because you demanded it. But there was another force that made me regret it.

"Then the storm came, and the wreck came—and you. You came to the point when all the world was in a fury of wind and water. You came to me then, and called. I answered you.

"As I must always answer you, Margaret! As you will always call me from whatever in the world is

black and sordid. There is nothing decent I have done in all my life save what you have called on me to do!"

She stepped backward toward the table, so that she could see the light upon his face.

"You mean that you saved this man, and saved him again? At the risk of your own life? For—my sake?"

"For the sake of the purity, the unselfishness, and the honor which is in the spirit of you!"

She leaned back against the table with a hand upon it either side of her. She spoke slowly.

"Yet you have played your part in it," she said. "If you hadn't come here, Harold Trench would still be an idiot boy; the hearts of those women who starved for the memorial to their dead boys wouldn't have been appeased, and this man would have died. Even if they had dragged him out of the water, there would have been no one here who would have made that ride for Doctor Stevens. You have played your part. I don't know what it is. You say, it is me. But it must be more than that. . . . It can't be me alone."

He tossed back his head, shaking it as an impatient horse tosses at his bridle.

"I wish I could make you understand," he said.

But her eyes were alight with understanding.

"I know!" she cried. "You say that I have given you the power to do these things. But it was there! You can see that, can't you? It was in you!"

"I only know," he said, "that you have shown me the way. In the name of the spirit you have shown me I have risked more than life or health. I've gambled my soul! And, because you have been at my side, I've won!"

"For me? You have done it for me?"

It was a question, and yet in her heart she knew the answer. She stepped a little forward as she said it, and, without thought, without volition, that movement was surrender. He grasped her in his arms. He pressed her close to him. With her against his breast, his eyes gazed beyond her, wandered over the illumined surface of the lamp shade. Wondering, doubting.

"For you!" he answered her. It was consummation. It was the reward after victory. It was safety, refuge, freedom.

His eyes fell upon a square of paper. A sealed envelope that leaned against the base of the glowing lamp. An envelope addressed to him! *It was a letter to him, from Wade!*

"Oh, no!" he cried in a queer, muffled voice. "No!"

But Wade's hand was clutching at his shoulder. Wade's harsh, reminding voice was in his ears. He slowly pressed the girl away from him; yet he felt rather that a strong arm was pulling him away from her. Pulling him away. Relentlessly. Providentially; for his touch must be contaminating, vile.

Perplexed, she looked up, and saw the harried glitter in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

But he did not answer her directly. Instead he spoke in the dull voice of a tired man who sees visions.

"I can't do a decent thing that he cannot see. I can't think a happy thought. I can't strive, or struggle or hope!" His voice rose, as fantastic fear seized hold on his tired mind. "I can never lay hold of a thing I most desire, nor stretch out a hand to succor the afflicted, save it bring that voice to me! I can never be free from that! I can never make myself free!"

He gazed into her face for a moment. Looked upon her as upon a thing he feared to touch; feared even to behold.

"But you were saying—" she cried. "We were—Oh, don't! Don't! Come back! I cannot understand! I did nothing! Nothing!"

He was at the door fumbling to open it, and she came to his side, clutching at his arm.

"No! No! I must go. I must go away!" he murmured. "I might have known it! I was a fool! I might have foreseen it! I must go!"

He pushed her away, striving to free his arm.

"But I said nothing! I did nothing! What have I done to offend you?" She clutched at his sleeve, his wrist, his hand. "No! Oh, please! Please! What have I said? What have I done?"

Blindly he pushed her back.

"Leave me alone!" he cried. "I must leave you! I must go!"

The door slammed.

"Ah, God!" she cried. And she sank to the floor. He was gone.

CHAPTER XXXII

A DISCREET VISITOR

Beetle Brower came to East Harbor the second time with an air of profoundest mystery, for it was to solve a mystery that he had come. He didn't come to Brookhampton by train but approached the village in a hired car from Greenport, fifteen miles away. He drove up to the store at an early hour in the morning and made discreet inquiries about almost every one in the village except Corvan. He then called at the Fiske farm.

Margaret's mother came to the door when she heard him scratching upon the wire screening. He said that he had called to see Mr. Grimshaw on very important business. Mr. Grimshaw was ill, she explained. Beetle Brower smiled understandingly and thereby made Margaret's mother feel as though she had been insulted. He knew all about it; that was the business he had come upon. So she led him to the bedroom, and made it very plain that he must limit his visit to an irreducible minimum, before she hurried back to her work again.

As soon as the woman had gone, Brower took upon himself that indescribable arrogance with which underling is wont to reprove underling. Grimshaw,

sitting wanly up in bed, clutched at the coverlet with his gnarled hands and eyed his visitor spitefully.

"Well?" queried Brower nasally. "What's the matter, Grimshaw? What's eatin' you? What's gummin' up the works? Wade wants to know."

Grimshaw's fingers plucked at the fringe.

"I've been sick," he said.

"Sure, you been sick!" There was mockery in Brower's voice. "You was so sick you couldn't even write a post card, and there wasn't nobody else in the whole burg you could get to do it for you! Hell, where d' you think Wade's gettin' off at? He sent you down here to get the goods on Corvan; what jer think you're doin'? Takin a day off?"

Grimshaw seemed to fix his dim, bleared eyes on Brower without knowledge of his presence.

"W'at did *you* come for?" he asked.

"To check up. What jer think I come for? To check up. That's what. Wade wants to know." For Brower that remark was justification as well as elucidation. "He ain't been able to get in touch with Maddox, so he sends you down. He sends you down because you got something on Corvan that can pull him back into line. And by Jeese! if you don't go an' get lost amongst the cows an' chickens, too!"

"So Wade sends you down," Grimshaw growled the words like the menace of an angry dog.

"That's the stuff. You babies seem to of forgotten that Wade's tryin' to pull off the biggest

graft of the century! With a rake-orf for ev'rybody! An' Wade ain't goin' to fall down on it, neither!" That was a threat.

"Not with you to help him, anyway," growled the older man.

"No, not wid me." Brower grinned with a leer. "Now what you got to do, Jed, is to get the screws on Corvan, and get 'em on quick. Wade wants to see results."

"How can I? I'm sick."

Brower's lean crafty face twisted with displeasure. He had heard the story of Grimshaw's coming to East Harbor and he had feared this.

"You mean you're backin' out?"

Grimshaw nodded.

"He saved my life," he said.

"All right. An' how about Wade? Wade hasn't saved you nothing, has he? Oh, no! Yeh wouldn't be up the river now if it wasn't for Wade, would you? . . . Oh, no, you wouldn't . . . and listen! He's saved your life, too, Wade has. How was it you didn't even get pinched when Dipper Joe got life? . . . Huh! I guess you owe Wade somethin', too."

Grimshaw chewed his lip for a moment. When he spoke he spoke slowly, wary of too much thought, which he had found to be treacherous.

"The engine failed' n' I run on to the sand bar up agin the rocks. Next I knew I was here, feelin' like I was burnin' in hell, and there was Corvan lookin' me over. I coissed him then, but afterwards they tell

me how he yanked me through the soif, an' saves my life. See?"

"Sure, a grand stand play!"

Grimshaw was not of the sort who patiently bears testimony against himself. He bared the blackened stubble of his teeth and his discolored gums in a grin which was a snarl.

"Yair!" he snarled. "Wade saves me to do his dirty work, so I'm his tool, see? Then Corvan saves me to make a grand-stand play, and he's got just as good a claim. They're evened up, see? . . . All right. But when he pulls me in I'm dyin' and Corvan rides for the doctor and the way they told me about it, he drove through a hell of storm like he was crazy . . . or like I was his father or something, and it wasn't any grand stand play!

"So that puts him ahead, don't it? . . . That puts Wade out of it, don't it? . . . See? I'm Corvan's man now!" His bleared eyes burned brightly for a moment, and Brower read in them a firmer resolution than Jed Grimshaw had ever previously betrayed.

"You're quittin'?"

"No, I'm stickin'—but it's somethin' new I'm stickin' to."

"Are you bugs?"

"No more than the rest of 'em. I guess Wade'll be lucky if he ever sees Corvan again. He's all ready to settle down here for good."

"What d'yeh mean? He's off the graft?" He was

intent upon gathering all the information he could about this strange matter, and pumped old Grimshaw with the shrewdness of a man who had been often cross-examined in the open court. Grimshaw told more than he knew he told, and Brower whirled to Brookhampton to burn up a wire between himself and the impatient Wade.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE COMING OF WADE

Margaret Fiske, coming in from the farm yard, saw Brower leave the porch and slide down the pathway to the gate in the furtive manner of his kind. Startled by the vile atmosphere which Brower carried with him, Margaret hurried instantly to Grimshaw and plied him with questions. Possessing nothing of Beetle Brower's guile, she obtained from the wily old reprobate no information whatever, but intuitively she connected the visit of the vile stranger with Corvan, as she had already intuitively connected Grimshaw with the unknown history of Corvan's past.

Something sinister and inexplicable had made Corvan fly from her presence, and there was something sinister and inexplicable about this stranger. All that day the thought persisted in her mind that the coming of this stranger, and his mysterious interview with Grimshaw, held a menace for Corvan. She would have gone to him with a warning, but there was pride to clutch at her heart with the remonstrance of his cavalier departure. . . . Yet he needed her. He should be told of Grimshaw's visitor. . . . Anyway, the thought came like the light of sun after low clouds, she had a letter to deliver to him. . . . She had promised Sally that

she would deliver that letter . . . she had promised. . . . In the morning she went to him.

. . . . . .

Corvan sat at his desk reading a letter. As he read it, his elbow lay upon a deed of title. He had that morning sent Henry Sumpty a check for the land which that deed transferred to the ownership of the village memorial committee. In the hours that had passed since he had torn himself from the presence of Margaret Fiske, and shut the door behind him upon the most exhalted moment of his life, he had pursued these humble affairs of the village with a resolution that held doubt from his mind. It was as though he held at arms length a reality which could not be denied. He barred that reality from his mind by taking up vigorously the first work that came to hand, and it was her work.

He had pursued the matter of the memorial, incidentally saving the Sumpty family from black despair; he had wired short imperative messages to sundry auction houses, and made the arrangements for an auction of household effects which would save the Spately sisters—who must give up their home—from ruin; and now, with his elbow upon the deed for the memorial site, he perused this letter from Dr. Compton.

Harold Trench, it seemed, was on the way to recovery. The doctor had relieved the pressure on the boy's brain, and relieved him, too, of the convulsive fits. He must now have rest, set forth the letter. Rest and proper treatment would complete the cure. Dr. Compton was sending Harold home. Corvan read the letter with

a frown. His forehead was furrowed with a thought that seared with an almost physical pain. The thought of that morning which had thrown the boy writhing at his feet, and brought Margaret Fiske to his side. . . .

He took up the envelope in which the letter had come. There was something in it. An inclosure. He unfolded it. A letter scrawled in pencil in the unformed handwriting of a child. It puzzled Corvan. What small boy could have written this? He turned over a leaf and glanced at the signature. There it was, printed out in ill-formed capitals, H–A–R–O–L–D T–R–E–N–C–H. A letter from the boy himself. Corvan's frown was filled with quick pity. The unformed scrawl and the printed signature were a history of that poor, twisted mind remade.

"I haven't ever seen you. I can't remember you. But I am writing to say that I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me. You have saved me from a life that wouldn't have been worth living. Doctor Compton has told me all about what I was like. And you have saved me from being like that. . . . I am well now and all the past seems like an awful dream. I can't remember any of it except a lady who used to come to me sometimes. She came to me after that last fit I had and took my head on her lap. I remember looking up into her face. I think she must be my mother. . . . If you see her tell her that I remember her. She is all I can remember, and I am glad of it. Doctor Compton says I will see you soon, so good-bye. It is hard for me to write because I have to learn to, so good-bye. I can't thank you enough. . . .

"H–A–R–O–L–D T–R–E–N–C–H"

Corvan stared across the desk. Far off, far off into the distance. "She is all I can remember, and I am glad of it." The words sang in his mind. Poor boy! Poor, lucky boy! There was no past for him, and she was all he could remember. If he, Corvan, could shut out all the past but that picture of her as she bent over the boy in her lap! And Harold Trench thanked him for it. . . . He, who had pushed her away. Who could not come near to her again lest he contaminate her by his touch. . . . Lucky kid!

The front door was pushed timidly open—some one entered and advanced hesitantly across the obscure light of the hallway—slowly, doubtfully the slight figure entered the living room—and Corvan's far-off gaze was resting upon the face of Margaret Fiske.

He arose from the desk, and stepped out into the living room. She came forward a little, uncertain how he would receive her. So they stood there, facing one another, incapable of words; he, gazing as though upon a vision; she, regarding him with fear for the boldness which had brought her here.

She held out the letter.

"This is a letter for you," she said. "I promised that I would deliver it."

He took it in his hand and looked at it, still with the mist of unreality between his eyes and the paper. He recognized it, and yet the dread that had accompanied his first sight of that inscription was now dulled. A question recurred to him which had torn at his mind all that night of his departure from her. How had this letter

come into her hands? By what twist of fate had it been ordained that the reminding voice of Wade should come through her? A sudden passion seized him as he stood there, his eyes fixed on the envelope. Lifting his gaze to hers, he startled her with the gleaming ferocity of it.

"Where did you get this? How?" he demanded. His voice was sharp and grating. She almost cried out, desiring to shut it from her ears.

"Sally Martin gave it to me," she said. Her voice was faltering, fearful. "She asked me to let you have it." She felt a quick pity for him. "What is it?" she cried. "What's the matter?"

The ferocious, angry passion in his eyes turned from her to the envelope. His body was tense with the resentment that possessed him. Dark, red resentment against Wade, and all his henchmen. Against the men and against the fate which had brought this filthy message in touch with her. With the clenched hands that crushed the paper with a madman's strength, he could have torn the life out of Wade in that moment. Suddenly his anger blazed into violent action. With all the strength of his hands, his arms, his shoulders, he ripped the letter into pieces. Tore it asunder in quick, passionate rending that would have ripped the throat out of a man.

"The black hound!" he cried. "He would use you! Even you!"

And he flung the pieces from him to the floor, to stand with his arms spread out in that gesture, gazing upon her, struggling to regain his lost composure.

"Oh, Dan!" she murmured. "What is it that's troubling you? What is it that torments you?"

But he was deaf to her. Himself once more, he regarded her calmly, with his mind upon the question of that letter. Perceiving the solution, he answered it aloud.

"Maddox," he murmured. "He gave Sally that letter. It was Maddox did that." And as though in that solution he found peace, he smiled.

"We won't talk of it again," he said to her. "We'll put it out of our minds. We'll forget that it ever happened. Come."

He stepped forward and took her hand.

"Don't stand wondering there," he said. "You came and brought it to me, so it was a good letter, because it made you come and see me. Let us dismiss it at that. Let us forget it, and let us forget what the sight of it did to my tired mind that night."

She smiled obediently, but it was a pensive smile. For she knew, as he did, that she could not forget.

"There are things," she said, "that I can't understand."

He had led her to the desk.

"Look," he said. "There is the title deed to the site for our memorial. You see I have been working since I left you, and all the work I have been doing is for you. Look here! Here's the final arrangements for the auctioning of the household effects of Harriet Spately and her sister. You know it takes place to-day. And here's 'Henry Sumpty, his mark,' to show that he's got enough capital to see him through the winter. All your

work, Margaret. Just as if you made every stroke of the pen yourself. . . . And here. . . . "

She leaned over the desk at his side, happily surveying the papers he showed her.

"And this?" she interrupted him. "Oh, it's a letter from a little child. That must be your work alone. I've never caused you to do anything for little children."

He looked gravely at the happy face so close to his.

"That," he said slowly, "is a letter from Harold Trench. The first he has ever written."

Slowly she looked into his face, and then slowly picked up the pathetic letter. She read it with dim eyes, and he stood over her, behind her, as she read.

"*I think she must be my mother!* . . ." she breathed.

"He means you," said Corvan.

She read on, moved, as he had been, by the pathos and the splendor of this miracle. Her eyes brimmed with tears when she looked up at him, and she was very close to him. Very dear to him, he felt.

"Oh, I can't . . . I can't . . . " she murmured.

"Your work," he said.

She smiled.

"Doctor Compton's," she protested. "It is a miracle. And we will see him soon. Oh, Dan! Think how glad his mother and father will be!"

"Yes." He felt uneasy of his part in this stupendous happening. "It's a miracle."

"Why do you frown?" She was examining him, questioning him with puzzled eyes.

"It will be absurdly overrated," he said, giving words to his thoughts. "I mean my part."

"Don't talk like that. You have done so splendidly for all of us. Please let it make you happy." Her eyes implored him. "I know at least one man who would give the world to have done what you have done!"

"Who?" he cried.

"Old Lionel Humphrey."

He remembered the old man's plea with a sting of self-reproach.

"Old Humphrey?" he asked her quickly. "What makes you say that? How do you know that?"

"Every one knows it. All who can understand!" Unconsciously she betrayed with those words the essence of her spirit. "There is nothing else in the world he wants so much as to see Harold Trench made sound. He would give his life to be the instrument."

He was regarding her with incredulous eyes.

"You come to me like a spirit," he said. "Oh, Margaret, you can't know what light you bring to me! What strength to live decently in a world that drags a man down!"

Again the pain and puzzlement clouded her face.

"Now you bewilder me again," she said.

"Bewilder you? The whole world is bewildering! The whole world is bewitched. I tell you, Margaret, that I never knew what suffering a life could hold until that old man came to me, and begged like a wounded

child for me to give him peace. It was a crazy, absurd thing he pleaded of me. He wanted to be allowed to pay for the cure of this boy. You can understand it . . . better than I. He wanted me to let him pay. And I refused him. . . ."

"No!" A mother might have uttered that cry in incredulous denial of a charge against a son. "No!" she cried.

"I refused him. It is one of the things you would have had me do, that I have turned down. And now you come to me. Like a voice. Like a spirit. It . . . it's uncanny. It's . . . Oh, God! Margaret, always come and help me to do the right and decent thing!"

He turned to the desk. . .

"What are you going to do?" she cried.

"I'm going to telephone old Humphrey and tell him. . . ." He called for his number.

"What?"

"That he is to have the privilege of making his grandson whole!"

She stood there and listened. Heard him greet old Humphrey at the telephone, and saw him as he gave his message. It seemed incredible that standing here, with the utilitarian mechanism in his hand, he could transfer through the intervening space a message that would lighten and fulfill the life of an old unhappy man.

Corvan stood tensely with the phone in his hand. His face was white with a pallor that had not left it since the day of the wreck. He was possessed with a presentiment that he must do this thing now, quickly, while

she was in the room; while she was present at his elbow. Too well he knew that all his toil and perilous endeavor had not made him free. Wade was as ever pulling the wires of fate, close to him, ready to whisper in his ear, or seize him with the grasp of a compelling arm. He felt a physical fear that brought cold perspiration to his forehead at the thought that he might not get old Humphrey on the wire. It was a fear which whispered that if he did not do her bidding now, another force might withold his hand from it forever. But the old man answered his call.

"It's Corvan. Dan Corvan!" he cried, and had to hold the old man to the other end of the 'phone. "I've received a letter from Compton." He explained the letter, told of its contents, and heard old Humphrey stutter with the emotion that overcame his words. There was gratitude in the old man's voice. "Don't thank me!" cried Corvan. "Thank Margaret Fiske. It was her doing. And yourself. You paid for it. At least you will have paid for it as soon as you give me a check!" He heard the babble which told him that Humphrey had no words with which to answer him. He gave the figures, amazed at the intrusion of such a material element as cold cash into the stupendous considerations that obsessed them all. And again he had to listen to the old man's struggle for words.

The front door of the house opened as he stood there striving to still the turmoil which his words had caused in Humphrey's heart. And then Margaret saw his face

freeze with a sudden tension of muscle and unbelievable hardness of expression.

With renewed bewilderment she turned to follow his distracted gaze and found that a man had entered the room. A rugged bulk of a man with a hard, bitter, uncompromising face, with a gash of a mouth that bespoke a life of bitter experience, and eyes as cold as steel. He stood there in the archway and glanced from Corvan to herself with those thin lips curved in the ghost of a bitter smile. And Corvan gave him back a glance of unquenchable defiance. For Brower had done his work and Wade had come to reclaim his partner from the quicksand, to loose the grasp of whatever turned the Great Corvan from his greatness of graft and gain. Wade had come to take a hand in the game himself. In the grim reality of flesh and blood, Wade stood before them now.

CHAPER XXXIV

CORVAN'S ANSWER

Corvan placed the telephone receiver on its hook and dropped the telephone to the desk. He now stood besieged by two forces, and his life and soul were in the balance. He was conscious of that, and, in the complexity of emotion which crowded his mind, he knew which force must be cast out. The impulse seized him to cast it out violently; to throw Wade bodily from this sacred world into which he had intruded. But in an extraordinary manner at this time, when his soul most vigorously repudiated the old life he had led, it was the Great Corvan—the controlled and scheming mind of the master confidence man—that took command of the situation.

Mastering his resentment he greeted Wade with the cool courtesy of a gentleman into whose home a stranger has walked without knocking.

"My name is Corvan," he said. "Do you wish to see me?" Wade had stood looking from the girl to the man, summing up a situation he had suspected from the first.

"Yes," he said, grinning. "My name is Wade. I've come on a matter of business. A matter you seem to have forgotten."

Corvan stepped close to him.

"Forgotten?" he asked. "That's peculiar; your name doesn't suggest anything I have forgotten."

Wade looked at the girl.

"If I could talk with you alone," he suggested, "perhaps I could stimulate your memory." The suggestion was a command.

Corvan walked very deliberately to Margaret's side.

"If you could leave us alone," he said. "This gentleman seems to have some business to talk over with me."

She had been watching them, conscious of a meaning in their discourse that she could not understand. Because she divined that that hidden meaning held a threat and a portent of evil for the man she loved, she was loath to leave him now, but she was helpless.

Without a word she allowed Corvan to accompany her to the door. He went out on to the porch with her, and Wade, watching through the window, saw them stand there for a moment speaking together, but he could not hear what they said.

"I'd like you to remember," she was saying, "that I trust you. There is something that I can't understand. It bewilders me. But I want you to know that I trust you. And I want you to trust me, too."

He was a step above her, and he leaned toward her. It was an appropriate position, for his heart leaned as his body did. He yearned for her continued presence. He, too, was loath to see her go.

"I trust," he said, "I trust you always. Don't let

anything lead you to doubt that. I love you, Margaret, and, God help me, I'm afraid I'm losing you!"

"Never!" she said. They could not act upon the emotions which moved in their hearts. Their voices must be low, and their words a deep secret between them, so that Wade could not hear what they said. He saw them part as casually as any two friends might part. He turned to face the door when Corvan reëntered the room.

It was the Great Corvan who returned from that moment on the porch—masterful, confident of his powers to persuade, or, persuasion failing, to command. He greeted the ironic figure of Wade with a grin of subtle defiance. He walked to the table beside the chesterfield and opened the humidor.

"Have a cigar?" he offered.

Wade chose a cigar with great coolness, but he bit the end from it viciously, and further relieved his feelings in the action with which he struck a match. Corvan, elegant and clothed with a certain grace, lit a cigarette.

"What's up?" he asked guilelessly. He was determined that Wade should fire the opening shot.

Wade puffed his cigar for a reflective moment.

"Just came down for the country air," he remarked. "You're sittin' pretty here, ain't you?"

"We're comfortable," said Corvan. He threw himself into the embrace of an armchair. Wade looked down upon him with narrowed eyes. Corvan smiled back.

"You had a good journey?" he asked solicitously.

"It's a long, hot ride on the train. I always get a parlor car at Jamaica."

"Always?"

"Once. How did you make out?"

"Rotten." Wade could contain himself no longer. "I hear that Queritt's been down here to see you."

Corvan grinned. The first shot had been fired. He must be wary now.

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind who told me. I know." While the air was charged with the antagonism of the two men, they both spoke in tones that never faltered from a note of genial good-fellowship.

Corvan walked to the door at the back of the room and opened it.

"Mrs. Bland!" he called.

The good lady responded, wiping her hands upon a spotless apron.

"Yes, sir?"

"Has there been a gentleman here to see me? Named Queritt?"

Mrs. Bland looked at him with astonishment.

"Why, of course, Mr. Corvan. That's the name of the gentleman who came up with you from the wreck."

"Ah, yes, of course," murmured Corvan. "Just one more thing, Mrs. Bland. This gentleman is Mr. Wade. He will stay here for a few days. Will you see that his bag is taken upstairs?" She would. And she was gone.

"Yes," said Corvan, turning again to Wade who had watched him with an alert and cycnical gaze. "It seems

that Queritt has been here. You're quite right." The two men stood regarding one another. Measuring one another.

"Let's sit down," said Wade suddenly. He spoke unctuously, and the thousand wrinkles about the corners of his eyes screwed up as his rugged cheeks lifted in a smile. He seated himself in the armchair Corvan had vacated, and Corvan came forward to take the chair that faced him.

"Dan," said Wade, "You and me are partners, ain't we? We been partners for a good many years now and pals in a good many little activities together." There was no mistaking the significance of his remark. "I play my part," he continued, "and you play yours. Ain't that right?"

"Go ahead," said Corvan.

"All right. That's how we stand. I play my part and you play yours. We work harmoniously together. See?" His harsh features had gradually resolved from the smile of his overture. His countenance had become grim as the effort at geniality subsided. Corvan, who was studying the man's face intently, felt for the first time the cruelty which lay behind that mark.

"Harmoniously," repeated Corvan, and there was a baffling note of irony in his voice. Wade, discerning the mockery, suppressed the rage which it aroused.

"Sure. You might say that I'm the guts of the outfit and you're the brains. We work together. Now in regard to this Turnstile Stores graft!" He leaned forward persuasively. "How're they coming, huh?"

Corvan felt then that he should have sundered his connection with this man long since. Long since he should have brought this scene to its conclusion. He should have flung down his challenge to Wade with a wire sent directly upon his refusal of Queritt's offer. But fate had prevented. Fate had held his hand and his mind from courting the battle that he should have begun.

"I'll tell you about this Turnstile Stores graft, Wade," he said. "There's nothing to it."

Wade stiffened, and Corvan knew he stiffened, but it was a rallying within himself that showed only in a flash of the swindler's eye. The flash appeared and as quickly disappeared. Wade's outward demeanor did not lose its unabating good-fellowship.

"Shucks, Dan," he said. "What are you talking about?"

"This: you started this graft, Wade. It began with you. It was your idea, and you sprang it on me when I was down here for a rest. A rest, see? All alone in the great city, you thought of a way to take a lot of cash out of Queritt's pocket and put it in your own. It was old stuff, and it was a crude play. But you didn't have to worry about that. You didn't have to worry about how crude it was because you could leave the job of smoothing off the rough spots to another man. You could leave it to me.

"That was a fine idea of yours, Wade, but, as it happens, I've never been in the habit of taking orders from the man who lays out the deal. You know that.

You ought to, and you ought to have known, that when you sent that gutter rat, Brower, down to give me your orders, that you didn't stand the chance of a gin rickey at an Elk's convention of getting any action out of me. So far as this Turnstile Stores graft is concerned, there's nothing to it. Not for me."

At these words a mocking laughter gathered in the eyes of Wade. Laughter that held the essence of a sneer. He pressed his lips firmly together and turned on Corvan with a sudden and impulsive movement.

"Dan," he said, "you and me won't quarrel. What you say may be the truth, and it may not. You know best." He paused as though to let the significance of his remark take effect. "You came here for a rest. That's all right. I remember just exactly what happened to make that rest necessary. Well, we won't argue about that either. . . . You came for a rest, and I want you to get it. . . . I want you to be in good shape when we start up the big stuff next fall. . . . See?"

"Let's talk about the present only," said Corvan quickly.

"All right, the present. I don't think you understand about this guy Queritt. It ain't as if you got to do any work on it. . . . It ain't as if you got to take any orders . . . you haven't got to work for anybody in this deal, not even for yourself. . . ." Again he leaned forward, emphasizing his possession of the knowledge he revealed. "Queritt is over at Brookhampton. He's going to stay there till you make up

your mind. And—prob'ly you don't know this." (There was raw sarcasm in that period.) "But he's ready to beg you to take a check for ninety thousand dollars! . . . That ought not to spoil your rest!"

"How do you know that?" Corvan dropped dissemblance now. He snapped out his words sharply.

Wade grinned, frowning, as he saw he had struck home.

"Never mind how I know," he said. "Maybe this guy Grimshaw isn't so friendly to you as you think he is."

Corvan detected the crude innuendo immediately.

"Don't lie, Wade," he snapped. "Grimshaw could never know anything of Queritt's movements. You've been spying on me!"

Wade suddenly arose. Unconcealed anger gleamed in his eyes. His rugged countenance was alive with a rage that held a certain menace.

"And what if I did? What if I did spy on you? Ain't I got a right? You come down here to the place I paid out good money to provide you with! And you come down here to 'rest.' To get ready for a graft that we're going to swing together. Then, when I swing it, you hold out on me! You double cross me! Ain't I got the right to spy on you then?"

Corvan laughed contemptuously.

"Don't lose your head, Wade," he warned, and he, too, arose to pace the floor. "You did get this place for me, and you paid money down for it. I guess you got my check in payment of that, didn't you? . . .

All right. That dismisses that! Now the point is that I'm going straight after this, and the Turnstile Stores proposition is all off. I'm going straight!" He turned his back upon Wade and strode to the window where, through an uneven vista of green trees, he could see the soft meadows and the shining bay beyond. A little breeze disturbed the leaves and grasses. From somewhere, invisible and remote, came the shrill voices of children at play.

The effect of his words upon Wade was remarkable. In his world the very words, "going straight," had a charm to conjure a sea of hatred and suspicion. It is a characteristic of stool pigeons that they begin by going straight. To Wade, these words from Corvan at this time were fraught with the same staggering importance that the command of a holdup man might have to a citizen of repute. He strode over to the window and spoke across Corvan's shoulder.

"Not so fast!" The guttural note in his voice gave his words the grotesque effect of a growl. "Not so fast, Corvan! You're in this thing too deep to let me down like this. You're smooth and you're high grade, and your line is as slick as ever, but by God! I'll see you damned before you play Jim Wade for a sucker!"

Corvan turned.

"I told you to keep cool!" he said. "Keep your shirt on. Keep your head. It's facts you're facing now!" He walked to the chesterfield and, taking a cigarette from the box at the table, sank into the great couch to light it. Wade stood at the window for a moment

glaring after him. Then, with a sudden thought, he took Corvan's advice and cooled, as lava cools, to a man of rock. His granite face lit in a smile that held no mirth, and he strode forward to stand behind the chesterfield and talk down upon Corvan's head.

"We won't fight, Dan," he said. "I ought to have known that, when you made up your mind to a thing, old Jim Wade could never move it. But listen, is it wise? Is it worth it? I know how it is when a man gets into the fix you're in. I've been like it myself. You can't think straight, and you can't see your way right. But it ain't worth it, Dan. It wears off in time and then where are you? . . . I tell you, Dan, the Great Corvan is too good a man to be ruined like this by a woman!"

Corvan whipped his cigarette from his mouth and threw it to the floor. He ground it beneath his foot with a gesture that bespoke his rage. Yet he must not lose his head.

"Where did you get that line?" His low voice hinted at the hot anger in his heart.

"Ain't it true?" Wade came around the great piece of furniture, and bespoke Corvan face to face. "Come, Dan, I know how it is—" Corvan winced. "I tell you I've had it happen to me. And it ain't worth it. They'll play you for a sucker like the finest con man in the game could never do. They'll moil and toil you to do what they want you to, and what does it amount to? They'll ruin a man to suit their pride, 'cause that's all it is—their pride. They want to show you that they can

make you different. If you're a sucker, they'll make you a crook. If you're a wise guy, they'll make a sucker out of you. It's the pride that's a part of every woman. And then what? Why, it just fades out, that's all. You just wake up some day and find that she don't mean any more to you than a heap of rags. That's all it gets you. Just let this Margaret Fiske drift back where she came from."

And then Corvan arose. He arose and stood close to the man who spoke so speciously before him. He pressed upon Wade, and when he spoke, his voice pressed farther still. It pressed beyond the granite exterior of the man. It pressed into his heart and into his mind.

"Now you've said enough," said Corvan. "You can stay here in the house, Wade, and you can rave day and night against the decision that I have made against you. But if you ever mention her name again in connection with this thing; if you ever again mention her name, and I hear you do it, I'll throw you bodily out of this house as if you were the lowest swine that you've ever associated with in your life!"

Wade stood a moment speechless, silenced by this tirade from the Great Corvan, who had never before looked with interest upon a woman. Then he came back.

"Like hell you will!" he said. "You can't do anything naughty any more like playing a pig of a greedy sucker, who bit at the chance of cheating a fellow man. Oh, no! Because why? Because the lady wouldn't like it. Because you'd lose out with her! That's why. All

right. If you don't play the game, I'm going to tell that sweet young lady just who the man is that's sparking her. Just why Daniel Corvan the Great is down in these parts, and just how sweet and pure his life was before she met him. . . . Where do you think you're going to get off then?"

Corvan listened to him with the stillness of a graven image. His face was a study in impassivity. His eyes never left their object, the gleaming, spiteful eyes of Wade.

"I get off clean!" he cried. His voice was pitched low, and his words were sufficiently surprising to cause Wade to stiffen in an unconscious rally of his faculties to a defense. "Because some day she must know! Some day it must be made plain to her what I am, and what my life has been. Until that day I can never know happiness or peace again.

He drew himself up and looked proudly upon the other man. "Now I'll tell you what you can do!" he said. "I can never tell her the truth and I know of nobody else that can. Unless it is you. So go to her! Tell her everything you know about me! Tell her, Wade! I dare you to! I challenge you to! I want you to! You couldn't do me a greater, finer service!"

And swinging his back upon the man, he strode from the room, flung open the door of his hired home, and slammed it behind him as he left the house. Wade stood for a moment transfixed, and then rushed to the window to see Corvan disappear among the trees.

"You dog!" he cried. "You'll double cross me!

You'll play the stool pigeon, the squealer! We'll see!" With a frenzy of rage he clutched the frail curtain in his fist as though it were the body of Corvan himself, and violently tore it from its place. It fell down, a flimsy heap, upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXXV

VARIOUS CONTACTS

Grimshaw sat out on the lawn of the Fiske homestead like a gargoyle enwreathed in flowers. A great willow tree bent over his chair, and on either side of him the Rose of Sharon shone with the glory of its flamboyant color. It was Grimshaw's first day out in the air, and he mildly enjoyed it. His appreciation was tempered with regret that he, who had never approached nearer to such pastoral peace than the view he could gain of it from the deck of his wretched craft, should now be reduced to lying, invalided, in the midst of it. Maddox lay on the grass at his feet and gave him what comfort he could. Sally Martin had insisted upon his doing the invalid this service, so he could not be expected to throw himself into it whole-souled. "Who did they think he was, anyway?" he argued to himself. But he did what Sally told him.

"You might just as well kick off here as anywheres else," he pointed out, by the way of good cheer and bright remark.

"And I'd 'a' done it, too, if it hadn't been fer him," responded Grimshaw solemnly. "It seemed like he was planted here for just that reason and nothing else but."

Corvan turned in at the gate. He was hatless but

trim and elegant as ever, in spotless white serge. There was an uncanny contrast between the youth and charm of his appearance and the inexplicable light that harried his eyes as it beat upon the mind behind them. Maddox scrambled to his feet as Corvan drew near. But Corvan seemed to ignore him. He came to a stand directly in front of Grimshaw.

"How are you to-day, Grimshaw?" he asked abruptly.

"Better." The old ruin looked up with surprise.

"Good. Now tell me this. How did Wade know all that has happened here in the last few days? Since the wreck?"

"Wade?" Grimshaw's mouth fell open ludicrously.

"Wade?" Maddox started as if the hand of death had clutched his shoulder.

"Yes, Wade! He's up at my house now!" Corvan examined the pair of them shrewdly. It needed no subtlety to see that they were dumfounded with surprise. He smiled a quick, bright smile. "I knew it!" he cried. "He said that he got his information from you, Grimshaw, but I knew he lied. I knew you had not played the spy for him!" The smile vanished. "But he knows!"

"That's Brower. He was snoopin' round," guessed Grimshaw.

"Brower? When?"

"Yesterday. He come over here an' pumped me. I guess he's been scoutin' 'round all the place and up to Brookhampton. He's a wise guy, the Beetle is."

Corvan's lips drew up with the gesture of a grin.

"That's it. But about Miss . . ." he turned upon Maddox. "Maddox!" he cried, and stared the youth in his face. "I ought to have remembered. You're his man!"

Maddox, open-mouthed with dismay, drew back.

"No! Honestergod, chief, no!" he cried.

"I'm not blaming you! I'm not accusing you! But you're his man. It was Wade sent you to me!"

But Maddox would not have it. With dismay he saw for the first time now the strong links of comradeship which bound him to this man. The partnership in adversity and danger which had brought him to hold the line which had separated Corvan from death. The inseparable part he had played in the drama which was Corvan's fight for something Maddox was scarcely capable of feeling. Called thus to choose between Corvan and Wade, Maddox knew at once what a century of ceaseless thinking could never have revealed to him. He was Corvan's man. He could not and would not sunder the bonds of his comradeship with such a chieftain. He would abide by Corvan's destiny, to rise or fall with it.

"Sure he sent me to you!" he blurted forth. There was almost a sob in his throat. "But if a guy sends you a dog, it's your dog, ain't it? Aw, chief, can it! Forget it! You an' me . . . Why, you an' me are pals, ain't we?"

Corvan listened to him coldly.

"How did Miss Fiske get that letter she delivered to me?" he asked.

Bitter anguish rushed into Maddox's eyes as he felt the bonds of fellowship slipping.

"Aw, chief, honest chief—aw, listen. . . ."

"You sent it to her?"

"But listen, chief. . . ."

"Did you?"

Maddox dropped his eyes.

"Yeah," he mumbled.

"How did you get hold of it? And that other which you put on my desk?"

"Aw, now, listen. I don't want yer to think—"

"I asked you how you got hold of those letters!'

"Aw, Wade says to me, he says—"

"You saw Wade? While you were staying in my house, sharing my meals, enjoying my confidence, you met Wade secretly and kept him posted. Is that it? . . . You spied on me, Maddox! You exposed to him the most intimate details of my life! And you say you are not his man!"

"I tell yer you got me wrong. Aw, chief, I can't tell it to yer so that you'll understand it! But you got me wrong!"

Corvan regarded him gravely for a moment. Then he laughed.

"It's all right," he said. "It doesn't matter. That part of it's over now. But when you see your friend again just tell him what I have said to you now. Tell him that he hasn't got spies enough. Tell him he hasn't got cutthroats or thugs enough to hedge me from the

thing I am going to do. Tell him you've done your best; but tell him it wasn't enough!"

He turned from the pair of them, and walked swiftly to the gate. Maddox, after a brief pause wherein he stood thunderstruck, speechless with dismay at this cataclysm which had followed realization of the nearest thing to an ideal that he had ever known, hurried after him. He clutched at Corvan's sleeve as he reached the gate.

"Don't turn me down!" he roared. "You got me wrong! Don't go orf like this! You got me wrong."

Corvan turned to him with a smile.

"Tell Wade that," he said, and, tearing his sleeve from the grip of the unhappy youth, he walked down the road alone.

He felt that he was alone now alone in truth. He could not turn to the Fiske homestead again, and there was no home or cottage in the village which would not mock him with the memory of his first coming there. He remembered that the Spately sisters were to have an auction that afternoon, for he himself had arranged that auction. He turned his footsteps in the direction of the post office which was their home. Outside the post office, however, he saw the battered buggy which was sacred to the travels of Lionel Humphrey, and he could not face that old man now. He remembered that he must attend the auction after luncheon. He could not compose his mind now, neither could he return to his rented manor house. And even the road to the point, that place

so friendly to the conflict of his troubled mind was barred to him, for at the point was the home of the Sumptys where joy reigned. Joy, which he had made from dark despair. He had done kind and worthy things in this village but feeling the grasp of Wade upon his shoulders, he would not face the people he had aided.

He decided to walk on the dunes. To find what consolation he could in the murmur of the waters, which he had come to understand like the voice of a friend since he had done battle with them.

He walked in the heat of noon, and saw the sun as it hung suspended in a golden glory that glittered cruelly on the waters. He turned back and spurned the soft sand with his heels on the homeward journey. He hoped that Wade would have made good his threat. He found it intolerable to hang thus suspended between the life to which Wade recalled him and the life he had chosen for himself. Margaret Fiske must some day know what he was. Until she knew, he could not live in peace. To give her up would be worse than death for him, and yet worse than that was the thought of Wade, present in the world wherein she moved. A reminding presence that placed all the devious, dishonorable passages of his past in hideous contrast with her. He must cast that presence out. He had flung his life into the balance and it had not won him freedom. He must go further, he must risk more than his life. He must risk the possession of her, her love and her regard.

He trod again the road which passed her house, and he knew as he passed it that she or one of her household must see him go by. Stubbornly he hoped that Wade had made his threat good while he had been away.

. . . . . .

But, when Corvan had flung his challenge, Wade had known that that avenue was closed. He had known then that he could never wield a power over Corvan through betraying him to Margaret Fiske. With the revelation that Corvan's love for her was genuine, Wade knew that he must look elsewhere for his weapon. Corvan must be forced to see this swindle through or be crushed and broken by his refusal. Wade was bent upon it. Corvan had quit the game, double crossed him. Wade would punish him for that! He would crush him for that! There was murder in Wade's heart as he ceased striding up and down the room and made his way to the garage where the hired auto and chauffeur, which had brought him down, were waiting his command.

"To Brookhampton and quick!" he snapped to the chauffeur.

It developed from his actions that he sped in this manner to Brookhampton for the sole purpose of burning the wires with a number of impatient telegrams and long-distance telephone calls, for after he had sent them he returned more leisurely to the house again.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE THIRD LETTER

Corvan lunched alone, and it suited his mood to do so. Yet he did not lunch in peace. It amazed him how the terrible tension of his mind could draw, like a taut bowstring, tight and tighter without snapping. Determination and blank contradiction raged in his mind like a torturing presence that had life, like a concrete substance that pressed upon the front of his forehead, drawing his brows heavily downward, that beat upon his brain so that he could feel the pulsation of it. He sat at the table eating with an action that was subconscious. He was scarcely aware of the flitting comings and goings of Mrs. Bland, who ministered to him with a plump placidity that blinded her to his nervousness.

Wade must have gone to her. He must have told her.

And yet would the man dare to make such a final, decisive move?

Yes, Wade would dare anything in his baffled rage.

Yet the fool must know that it would terminate all hope of seeing the swindle through.

Questions and answers. A wild and torturing debate raged in his mind.

He must go to her himself. He could endure suspense no longer. He must know.

He would give a good deal to know where Wade was now. . . . And what was in the man's mind?

Corvan smiled grimly with the thought that Wade still hoped that he would take up Queritt's offer. That, at any rate, was definitely settled. He had fought that battle out and he had won.

Yet if Wade had not gone to the girl, where was he? What was he up to now?

As though in answer to the question in his mind, a car crunched the gravel of the driveway and came to a stop. Corvan dropped his white napkin on to the tablecloth and sat still, listening. The front door opened, and a heavy tread sounded in the hallway. Corvan pushed back his chair and rose. He stood for an instant and drew a deep breath; then, prepared, he strode from the dining room and found Wade standing rigid in the hall with an inscrutable smile to greet him.

Corvan turned immediately to the living room.

"Come in here!" he said. It was an order, uttered harshly, in a voice that was hard as flint. Wade, not losing his dark smile, followed him in. Corvan threw the curtains, and leading the way to the alcove, the inner room, threw the curtains upon that sanctuary, too.

"Sit down!" he ordered.

Wade very deliberately sank into the indicated chair.

Corvan turned squarely upon him. His impassive face was pale as parchment; his voice rang cold.

"Have you told her?"

Wade continued to smile. His fingers drummed upon the arm of the chair.

"No," he said. "I'm not a blasted fool!" His oath was characteristic. A cold, hard adjective. An emphasis.

Corvan breathed again, a deep breath. He knew then that his challenge had been a desperate resort. He was glad that Wade had not revealed him to the girl. He walked to the desk and leaned back upon its edge, facing Wade.

"Why did you ask?" mocked Wade, fixing him with a sneer. "It didn't sound so good when you thought it over, did it? Well, it didn't sound so good to me, either!" And Corvan knew that it was not mercy that had withheld Wade's hand. What, then? Weakness?

"Have you changed your mind?" continued Wade.

Corvan grinned back at him. He had challenged Wade to do his worst, and Wade, seeing the futility of it, had not dared. He felt that he could deal with Wade now.

"No!" he snapped. "The deal's all off!"

A murderous gleam entered the eyes of Wade.

"All off?" His voice was a snarl. "Think it over, Corvan. I'm warning you. Think it over! You mean to say that the deal is still—all off?"

"Is that all you've got to say?" mocked Corvan. "I'm pressed for time." He took out his watch and referred to it. "Got to attend an auction."

"So it's all off! That's final?" Wade was restraining something. Pressing something back within him. Rage, thought Corvan. An almost ungovernable rage.

"That's final!" he said.

Wade glowered at him.

"Just a minute, Dan. Don't go into this off a hair trigger. It didn't sound good to me to squeal to that skirt of yours. But you want to remember that I can do you harm down here. I got the power to do you harm. Just Maddox could spill enough to make things pretty hot. Maddox could tell enough about you to make this place too hot to hold you. You want to remember that."

"I saw Maddox this morning. I told him to come to you and say that you couldn't browbeat or bribe spies enough of his sort to move me an inch. You've got my final word."

Still Wade seemed to hold a check upon something that lay hidden within him, that seemed concealed by a wall of granite, which might yet burst asunder. He spoke heavily but almost softly.

"I wouldn't use Maddox as a spy," he rumbled. "I'd use him as your friend!"

The curtains were ripped suddenly apart. The men started back, surprised.

"All right, use him!" cried Corvan. "Here he is!" And he turned to allow Maddox to pass him.

This Maddox did with a rush. His face was red and he drew his breath quickly. Obviously he labored under a great and soul-stirring agitation. Almost ignoring Corvan, he planted himself directly before Wade.

"So you're here!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'm glad! Here! Lookut this!" He pulled a dog-eared envelope from his pocket and brandished it before Wade's face. "You gave me three of 'em!" he cried. "Three of 'em!

An' like a damn fool I deliver two of 'em for yer! I let him find one on the desk, an' I fix it so's he gets the other one from her! But that's all! He's a straight guy, an' a good pal, an' I've come here to tell yer that I'm through! I don't play with you any more, Wade. You can go to hell, and take your little letters with yer! See? Lookut this!"

And with his hands held high before Wade's astonished face, the impassioned youth ripped the offending letter into little bits and flung them to the floor.

"Dan Corvan probably ain't got no use for me, but after this I'm his man, to call on when he wants! That's what I come to say!"

He stood silent upon that. Aghast at his own words. Confused by the fervor of his own actions. The two men silent, too, gazed gravely at him.

"That's all!" he blurted forth lamely.

"And that's enough!" cried Corvan. He stepped forward and wrung the hand of Snake Maddox. "Thanks!" he said.

"Aw, forget it, chief!" murmured the Snake, abashed. He turned to the grim figure of Wade, seated silent in the armchair. "That's all," he repeated.

"You'd better go now," said Corvan.

"Sure." Maddox sidled out. He seemed to have exploded with his fervent declaration like a balloon; and like an exploded balloon he took his leave. Only as he passed through the curtains did he glance once, appealingly, at Corvan. And he was rewarded by Corvan's

smile. There was friendship there. Comradeship. The first Maddox had known in his life.

Corvan turned back to Wade.

"And now you've finished using Maddox," he said softly, "I'll be going. I have an engagement." He, too, turned to leave the room.

"Wait!" roared Wade. "By God, I've got something to say to you!" He strained forward in the chair as though he resisted something which held him down.

Corvan returned to the desk.

"Say it!" he said.

Wade swore.

"You're playing the quitter, Corvan! You're double crossing me, and, by Christ, you can't get away with it!" He still strained forward in his chair, his face distorted by his effort to compose it. "You thought you put it over when you dared me to squeal to the girl! You thought you had me stopped that time! But I tell you when you play the Judas with me, Corvan, and I make a threat like that, I've only just begun! Listen!—" He leaped to his feet, and glared into Corvan's face with the ferocity of a savage. "You came down here to 'rest.' See? Well, out of the real reason you came here, I can get the goods on you! Charlie Broderick died of his wounds the day you left New York!"

A sudden silence filled the room as he stopped short. The triumph of a fiend shone in his eyes. Corvan grinned slowly. His face was white as parchment.

"You mean you'll squeal?" he said. Then pulling himself together: "Forget it. It's a pipe dream."

"A pipe dream, huh? Maybe it's a pipe dream that you had to run down into the country the next morning. Maybe it's a pipe dream that the whole damn Central Office is trying to find out where Broderick was the night before he came home shot to hell! You know me, Corvan. You know how I stand in the city. You know the drag I got if I want to start anything. Well, on what happened at Welsh's that night I can frame you for a trip up the river for life!" Corvan's smile turned to sudden soberness. *Frame you for the chair, by God!* And I'll do it!" roared Wade. . . . "If you don't come through!"

The deadly import of the sentence crashed home upon Corvan like a blow. He knew his underworld well; and he knew Wade. Clearly, he saw the steps that Wade could take. With the Broderick fortune as his ally, the political "drag" of which he boasted, and the cooked testimony of Welsh, Wade could wield a terrible weapon for his destruction. With the lightning passage of swift vision, Corvan's mind reviewed a pageant of miserable wretched crooks, who, having turned against their comrades of the underworld, had been destroyed, even as Wade threatened now to destroy him. He stood without knowing that upon his face was the expression of a hunted animal at bay. But for only a split second. The other side of Wade's harsh threat—the absurdity of it—dawned upon him as quickly as that.

The key to Wade's strength lay in Welsh and Noylan, and any other wretched hireling who could be found to bear witness to what occurred that night. And it flashed

upon Corvan's mind that Welsh would be more difficult to find than a vanished mist. Wade would be fortunate if he got in touch with the gambler within a month. Noylan and the others could be had only through Welsh. A lightning, feverish calculation assured Corvan that he, too, could have vanished like the mist, before ever Wade could prepare his "case." It was a bluff, guessed Corvan.

"You fool!" he cried. "You're not talking to Maddox, now! You're not talking to Beetle Brower! Do you think you can move me with a bluff? Do you think you frighten me out of the greatest thing in the world? You spoke this morning of how long we have worked together. If you had a particle of brains you ought to have learned in that time what kind of a man I am. You're talking to Corvan, now! And I'm going to give my answer once and for all! Go up to the city and squeal! Yell your lies and your rage from the housetops! This swindle is not going through! That's final. Now squeal!" He laughed in Wade's face. He laughed because he saw a black shadow at the back of the man's eyes that was murder. Lord, he thought, if he could, he'd do it. He'd send me to the chair—if he could.

So black was the malice that clouded Wade's hard, bright eyes, that Corvan steeled himself to fend off a blow. The two men stood close upon one another, fists clenched with a grip on Wade's part that would have torn and rent rather than struck. But the blow was never given. Suddenly, abruptly, Wade relaxed. He drew

back a step, and regarded Corvan with a gaze inscrutable save for the malignant gleam that it betrayed.

"All right," he said. He spoke with extraordinary bitterness. "You let me down. By God, you'll take the consequences, Corvan. You think it's a bluff. All right, go right ahead. Only listen! Watch your step! See?"

Corvan very deliberately looked him in the eye.

"I'll watch," he said. "There's an auction down at the post office, that I've promised to attend. You don't mind if I do my watching there?"

"Please yourself!" he said.

"I will." And Corvan left the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII

CORVAN BIDS AGAINST FATE

That strange silence, which is part of the illusion of loneliness in a crowded room, afflicted Corvan as he stood rather wearily in the Spately drawing-room and watched the auctioneer's men bring forth a bedroom suite of finest Heppelwhite. The auction had been in every way a success. The Misses Honoria and Annabelle Spately had never dreamed that the old furniture which crowded the big rooms of the old home at the Corners would have brought so many strangers from afar to bid against one another for the possession of it. Nor would those strangers have come had not Corvan seen that the New York and New England dealers in antique furniture had all been notified. Nor would they have bid so high had not that elegant young man with the tense and serious face always chimed in to top their bids with an advance so delicately shaded that they invariably met it with a better.

Corvan had stood there in the babbling crowd and subtly done his work with a tenacity of purpose that saw, in every word he uttered to advance the cause of these helpless women against a greedy world, a new bulwark against the pressure that Wade wielded. More heavily than Corvan was aware, that pressure beat upon the wall of his resistance. Unconsciously, the tenacity with which he pursued this task was a recognition of the

frail foundation upon which his bulwark against Wade was built.

The room was hot and the air thick with the breath of many people. In the pause while this new lot of furniture was brought to the block, the air was filled with a babble of talk. Corvan felt tired. He noticed for the first time how dim was the light that flooded the open windows. Dim, and of the tint of burnished gold. It was the sunset. He had been there all afternoon. He had seen room after room of the great old house emptied to fall before the hammer of the oily-tongued auctioneer. This lot must be the last.

His eyes roved about the room, but he could recognize but few faces in the crowd. East Harbor had not seen so many strangers in years. Over against the wall, seated upon the camp chairs of the auctioneer, Corvan caught a glimpse through the moving crowd of Maddox with Sally Martin beside him. He smiled with a new understanding. So that was where Maddox had been keeping himself, he reflected. Maddox had no defiance in the face of Wade; and he had no doubt returned directly to that presence. Maddox seemed to have derived a remarkable sense of happiness from the experience.

Corvan now found his eyes scanning the room with a definite objective. But he was disappointed. Margaret Fiske was not visible. He mentally decried the crowd that obscured his vision, and turned his eyes again to the dais of the auctioneer. Beside it, against the wall, he saw the two Spately sisters. He had seen

them before that afternoon, and had noticed the worried expression of imminent disaster disappear as they had seen their belongings obtain for them undreamed-of sums. So his attention was caught by the woe which branded their gentle faces now.

Miss Honoria pressed a handkerchief to her lips, and Miss Annabelle, who was the pretty one, stared hopelessly before her. The eyes of both were fixed in these sad glances upon the chaste contours of the Heppelwhite bedroom suite. Corvan remembered then the words of Margaret Fiske. She had told him among the myriad of thoughtful, understanding things she was wont to impart to him, of the deep and sentimental attachment the two old maids cherished for those inanimate articles. The old furniture had adorned the bedroom of the first Spately who had come to America. It had been their grandmother's intimate possession, and their mother's. Each of them had been born in the bedroom which it furnished; and as the family fortune dwindled and they saw the time approaching when they must give up their home, they had "taken the post office" in a pathetic and futile effort to maintain possession of that bedroom set. Corvan, remembering this, felt a keen pity for them. He had learned in the last few weeks what a symbol could mean in the life of a man. To these two desolate old maids, the furniture was a symbol.

"Genuine Heppelwhite!" The auctioneer was putting it up for sale. "Made in England when our great-great-granddaddies were kids!" (He was a flippant auctioneer.)

"There's five pieces including the colonial mahogany clothespress that you see before you. I offer them to you, ladies and gentlemen, in three lots. The bed, the bureau and chairs, and the clothespress. A wonderful opportunity that would grace a king's museum. Articles of virtue every one. What am I offered for the bed, gentlemen? What am I offered."

"Fifty dollars!" It was the inevitable starter.

"Sixty!"

"Sixty-five!"

"Seventy!"

The bidding halted for a moment at seventy-five, and the auctioneer became sarcastic.

"Eighty-five!" snapped Corvan. He remembered his part.

"Eighty-five, eighty-five, gentleman offers eighty-five!" droned the auctioneer.

"Ninety-five!" It was the voice of a dealer. That bed would command half a thousand dollars in the side streets off Fifth Avenue.

"A hundred!" Corvan played his part.

"Hundred and twenty-five!"

"Hundred and thirty-five!" The dealers were admitting its value.

"Hundred and fifty!" cried Corvan.

"Hundred and fifty! Hundred and fifty! I'm offered a hundred and fifty!" droned the auctioneer. "Do I hear seventy-five? Come, gentlemen, we can't let this bed go for one hundred and fifty dollars! Let me hear

your bids! Seventy-five! Seventy-five! Do I hear one hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

For a moment it seemed as though Corvan had overreached himself. As if no higher bid than his would be forthcoming, and that he must be the purchaser himself. And in that moment it occurred to him, why not? Why should he not buy in the entire suite to give it back to the old sisters who loved it so?

"One hundred and seventy-five!" A dealer dropped the bid like a discreet confession.

"Two hundred!" snapped another.

"Two hundred, two hundred!" droned the auctioneer.

"Two twenty-five!" snapped Corvan.

"Two twenty-five, two twenty-five." The auctioneer embarked again upon the jargon of his trade, but no other bids responded.

"Going, going, going at two hundred and twenty-five dollars," sang he. "Are there any more bids? Are there any more bids for this pure Heppelwhite bedroom suite? Going! going! *gone!* for two hundred and twenty-five dollars!" He pointed Corvan out with his mallet and turned to the chairs and bureau. Corvan felt a fierce glow of satisfaction at this material victory. This was conflict. As the sea and the wind had offered him their solace, this clash of will served to invigorate his doubting, harassed mind. As he had found strength against his lower self in the risk he had taken to save the shipwrecked man, he now found strength against Wade in this kind and decent action. It had seemed to him once that there was nothing decent he could do without

invoking Wade to clutch at his soul with a remainder of what he was. For the first time now he was free of that. He had broken with Wade for good. He had called the man's bluff, and put the Great Corvan behind him forever. He had saved a part of the thing which was for these two women a symbol as potent as the symbol of Margaret Fiske had become to him; and he would save the whole! Wade could not reach him now!

With the thought of Margaret Fiske and the new strength in him, he turned, and his eyes roved about the room—proud, exultant eyes. He could not find her, although he examined all the people about him. A movement of the people opened a new vista for him. He glanced quickly there . . . and his heart fell, his exultation vanished. Before him was the crafty face of Beetle Brower, mouthpiece and spy of Wade!

Why was Brower here? What was the message he bore? Corvan swiftly reviewed his passage at arms with Wade, while the bids were opened on chairs and bureau of the symbol the old hearts cherished. Had the crafty swindler's bluff been really called? he questioned. Or was he still in the hands of the past? Perhaps he was not so free from that compelling grasp as he had thought. "Twenty-five, twenty-five, going for one hundred and twenty-five!" the man with the hammer was crying.

"Fifty!" The words leaped to Corvan's lips with the realization that his work was not yet done. As he cried out his bid he made a resolve in his heart. No power in the world would prevent him from seeing this thing

through. Wade did not have the strength. Fate did not have the strength. If he must continue this fight to the end of life and beyond, then he would do it. Margaret Fiske had filled his life with her clean philosophy of useful, kindly deeds. Deeds of a simplicity that he had never before dreamed of doing. Yet now he would not put one—not the simplest one—of them aside in the face of the grimmest menace of the world.

"Two hundred!" he cried, as the bids soared high and higher.

The atmosphere of conflict filled the room. Dim pauses followed every reckless bid with which Corvan pressed the dealers above their shrewd advances. This wild opposition at first irritated the men of commerce and then impressed them. The rising bids emphasized the value of the things for which Corvan fought. The estimated profit to be made from the chaste furniture grew more desirable as it grew narrower. They would make special displays of it. They would angle for millionaires with it.

"Two hundred and seventy-five!" cried a little, apoplectic antiquary. He would charge that for each piece.

"Three hundred," snapped Corvan.

"And twenty-five!" was reluctantly drawn from another.

"You're crazy!" whispered an attenuated decorator of interiors in Corvan's ear.

"Fifty!" murmured the little man, seeking the auctioneer's eye.

"Shut up!" hissed the thin man at Corvan's side, as

he was about to speak. "Let him have it. We'll syndicate."

"Seventy-five!" snapped Corvan.

"Ninety!" The thin man gave Corvan up in disgust.

"Four hundred!" cried Corvan.

A dull silence followed.

"Four hundred, four hundred," sang the auctioneer.

Corvan felt the suspended thought that filled the room.

"Going," cried the auctioneer. "Going!"

The silence obstinately continued. The hammer fell.

"*Gone!* for four hundred dollars!" Again the hammer pointed Corvan's way, and he smiled grimly. His barrier was stronger now. He felt more sure of himself. He looked to see if Brower were still present, and, as he turned a squat, bulky figure pushed through the crowd to stand benëath the dais and regard the faces of the throng. It was Jim Noylan, Welsh's bouncing butler.

Corvan drew sharply back, filled with repulsion and cold dread. He remembered with vivid vision how Noylan had stood, gun in hand, above the wounded form of Broderick; and how he had obeyed Welsh with solemn subservience as the body was lowered into the launch.

Noylan's eye alighted upon Corvan, and he leered quickly, a satisfied and self-assuring leer. Corvan stared back at him with no recognition in his eyes; but he turned quickly away again as the significance of Noylan's presence overwhelmed his mind. Wade had threatened to face him with an array of witnesses who could enmesh him in the happenings of that night. He had called

Wade's bluff at the time, *but Wade had not been bluffing.* Noylan was the living evidence that Wade had the key to Corvan's ruin.

"—and you won't find three more like it in the country!" The man of trade was placing the clothespress on the block. "How much am I offered?"

The bidding began, but Corvan was deaf to it. All other considerations of his life vanished before this vital fact that Wade had the key to his ruin. He saw the many faces about him as if in a dream, and heard at his side the persuading voice of one man who was bent upon keeping him from entering this contest. Yet he could not tell what the man was saying.

"I'm going out!" he murmured, and pressed his way toward the door. He must see Wade. This thing must go no further. Wade must be silent. Noylan must go back. With an agony of dread he saw the ground falling away beneath his dreams and aspirations. With a dull and unabating pain he saw himself torn from everything that he had learned to love.

He found himself at the doorway, and as he arrived there a flutter of excited voices arose on the room. It was a burst of bidding for this one of only three antique clothespresses in America.

"Eighty-four!"

"Eighty-six!"

"Ninety!"

A babel of sharp voices startled him from his preoccupation. They were bidding. And he was running away. Realization of his action flooded his mind. He

had been running away. But a moment before, he had dared Wade in his mind to halt him in the doing of this single kindly act. This was to have been one thing he did that could not call forth the warning voice of the past. Yet that warning voice had spoken, and he had held his hand. He was running away because Wade had brought Noylan down to frighten him.

Corvan turned on his heel in the doorway.

"He can't do it!" he cried to his soul. "Wade can't turn me from this, if he brings the devil himself here!"

Wade might menace him for it, blackmail him for it, or jail him for it. But he would see the thing through if he walked from this room into the portals of hell!

"Ninety-five is bid! I am offered ninety-five. Who says a hundred?" cried the auctioneer. But the dealers were standing together now. No one would say a hundred. "Ninety-five, ninety-five, going at ninety-five."

"One hundred!" cried Corvan. And the room turned toward him, surprised.

"And ten!" But the voice was half-hearted. The enemy was back again. They could not contend with Corvan.

"One hundred and twenty!" cried he.

"And twenty!" echoed the auctioneer. "One hundred and twenty."

"One hundred and thirty!" came a bid.

"Five!" snapped Corvan.

"Any more?" The auctioneer cajoled and persuaded, but Corvan had ruined the game.

"Going," cried the auctioneer.

Corvan advanced from the doorway. His blood was up, his mind was alert to stop immediately any presumptuous raising of his bid.

"Gone!" and the hammer dropped. "Gone to Mr. Daniel Corvan at one hundred and thirty-five dollars. And now, gentlemen, we have here—"

But Corvan did not know what they had there, for, advancing to the desk where a harried assistant took note of all the sales, Corvan pushed politely around a slim, flashily dressed gentleman and found himself face to face with Harmon Welsh!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CLOSING OF THE DOOR

So it was done. Wade had not been bluffing. Before he had made his threat, no doubt before he had left the city, he had communicated with Welsh and arranged this gathering of witnesses which was the key to Corvan's ruin. Corvan summed up the situation in a single flame of thought as he stood face to face with the gambler, Harmon Welsh. He knew that Welsh harbored a grudge against him, and he knew that Harmon Welsh was unforgiving. With this man and the creatures of this man to help him, Wade could make good his threat. He could frame Corvan for a prison sentence. *"For the chair!"* Wade had cried. Corvan doubted that, but quickly upon the doubt he remembered that he doubted once that Wade could bring these false witnesses together. What if Wade had spoken the truth again? Corvan felt a sickly, hopeless premonition that anything could happen to him now.

Like the recurring chorus of an ancient tragedy, the old thought hummed in his mind. He could do nothing good, nothing decent, kindly or genuine, but what he brought down upon himself a retribution. It was as though, in each decent thing he did, he transgressed a natural irresistible law. And every such effort he had

made had brought him nearer and nearer to this threshold of ruin, even death!

If any person in that room had looked upon those two men then, they would have seen them standing, facing one another, each apparently transfixed by a witchcraft that held them wordless. There was struggle there, conflict; a desperate and deadly encounter. But it was a fight without words or weapons. The spectator would only have been startled and shocked by what might have been discerned in the eyes of the men.

But none saw them. It was the end of the auction, and a crowd of tired bargain seekers were intent upon the rich old bric-a-brac which was now under the hammer in a last hurried "lot." They bid quickly, hurriedly, for it, and it was with the sound of the bidding in his ears that Corvan stood, feeling as isolated with the man before him as though upon a desert island, and thought the flaming thoughts which seared his soul.

"So this," a soundless voice was speaking to him from within that mass which pressed upon his forehead, "this is your fate. Years back you chose the pathway of your life, and it is written that you must walk that path forever, without straying, without turning back. If you linger to indulge in any ray of sunlight, if you turn from the way to seek any flower that is sweet or beautiful or scented with cleanliness, you will be lost."

"Hello, Corvan!"

Welsh's voice seemed to have come after a century of suspended time. A hateful, unforgiving leer was in the gambler's smile. He seemed to gloat.

"Sixty, sixty-seven dollars," droned the voice of the auctioneer. "Do I hear seventy?"

"Sixty-eight!" was bid.

"Seventy!" cried another.

Corvan answered the gambler's smile. So fate, in the person of Harmon Welsh, the gambler, was to run him down.

"You've come to get me?" He spoke thickly, in a deep, low voice.

"No," protested Welsh. "To remind you."

Corvan's eyes narrowed as he saw the triumph gleam in the other's eyes. Must he capitulate to that gross triumph? Must he surrender to such scum as this? His soul revolted.

"Going," droned the auctioneer. "Going for seventy-five dollars!"

Corvan heard that droning voice, and his heart leaped up with a singular effect of gladness. The need of two poor sisters was as a weapon to his hand. With the simple ministrations that a girl had taught him, he could fight this leering fate.

As though in answer to Welsh's words, he grinned broadly a defiance in the gambler's face, and swung on his heel to face the dais.

"Eighty!" he cried.

There was a disturbance in the tired crowd. A flutter of excitement and despair.

"Eighty-five!" cried a dealer frantically.

"Eighty-six!" roared Corvan; and he laughed.

The eyes of the room turned upon him, and he saw them.

"Ninety!" snapped the thin dealer in antiques.

Corvan saw the many faces, and laughed. There was Maddox, on his feet at the wall. Skulking in a corner, Brower frowned upon him. Backed by a group of conspiring dealers, Jim Noylan stood like a block of wood gazing upon him with the solemn eyes of a hound. And Welsh leered up from his place beside the table with puzzlement in his eyes. Corvan saw them all, and a great spirit throbbed within him. He felt that in this contest of commerce he was fighting all the evil forces of the world. He was fighting fate and ruin. He was fighting for a place at the side of a decent, pure woman. He was struggling to maintain a place upon the heights.

"One hundred dollars!" he cried, and there were no bids to meet him.

"Going," mourned the auctioneer. "Going."

Corvan's eyes swept the room. He was alert for every sound and every movement.

"Gone!" and the hammer fell.

Corvan caught the eye of Welsh, and laughed. Then a movement in the doorway caught his eye, and the laugh faded upon his lips. For Margaret Fiske was entering at the door, and by her side was Grimshaw.

With her entrance Corvan felt that tension of mind and nerve which must be the lot of a field marshal who sees the enemy closing in about him and brings forth his last reserve. Ignoring the presence of Welsh, he made his way to the table where the auctioneer's clerk

dealt with the successful bidders. Margaret greeted him, and he composed himself to reassure her.

"You came at a crucial moment," he said.

She, believing he referred to his successful bidding, was a little puzzled at his seriousness.

"Are you going to open a furniture store?" she asked.

Maddox came and put the same question in a manner all his own, but before Corvan could answer them he was besieged by the Spately sisters. On the verge of tears, they congratulated him.

"It's hard to see the old things go," faltered Miss Honoria. "But we couldn't have hoped to see them in better keeping. We are so glad it is you who got them, Mr. Corvan."

"I didn't," said Corvan. "They are yours."

They didn't understand. Corvan turned to Margaret helplessly.

"Explain to them that the furniture is theirs," he pleaded. "A little present for them."

Margaret turned to the two little ladies, and Corvan watched her as she quieted their fears, silenced their embarrassment, and gave them richly of the sympathy and understanding which was the soul of the girl.

The room was nearly empty now. The crowd had hurried away, and there was only a little knot of dealers grouped about the table, and a few others, talking in the room. Corvan had seen Brower and Noylan go off arm in arm; but he knew that Welsh was standing in the doorway. Waiting, he presumed, to take his arm

as Brower had taken Noylan's and murmur cryptic menaces in his ear.

There was Welsh in the open doorway, and here was Margaret Fiske busily engaged upon a work that was characteristic of her. Corvan looked from one to the other, and a sudden revelation flooded his mind, filled him, overwhelmed him, so that he felt for a moment blind and weak. In all the long battle he had waged, the conviction and the knowledge that he could never have her, that under no consideration could she ever be his, that even while he fought for his soul with her spirit to uphold him, he contaminated her, entangled her in unmentionable things; in all that long battle it had never come home to him with such terrible conviction as the presence of Welsh now brought it home to him.

He saw suddenly with a new vision; and what he saw confounded him. His battle had been for himself; and now for that self he must sacrifice her. It was she who must suffer when the revelation came. It was the unselfish and devoted spirit of Margaret Fiske that must be broken when Wade's forces closed in upon him. And she would fight for him. She would face these hard, contaminated men in person; he would not be able to prevent that. As the field marshal, upon whom the enemy is closing in, must refuse to sacrifice his reserves to annihilation if he loves them, Corvan saw, with this crushing clearness of new vision, that he could do battle no longer.

"I must run along!" he murmured thickly in her ear. "I must get back to the house."

And leaving her to continue her ministrations upon the poor, bruised hearts of the two sisters, he hurried through the doorway, passing Welsh, passing the lined cars of the dealers he had brought to do his work; hurried up the peaceful stretches of the scented country road; through vine-clad hedges, and between green meadows tinted with purple in the twilight; hurried back to his home where Wade was—and the humiliation of surrender.

. . . . . .

Corvan found Wade upstairs in his bedroom. The door was ajar, and Corvan entered without knocking. Wade sat in an upholstered rocking-chair and vigorously smoked a cigar. Corvan closed the door behind him and stood regarding his enemy.

"It's all over between you and me, Wade!" he said. In a peculiar manner he had never seemed to Wade more elegant, more the princely gentleman among commoners, than Wade saw him now. His bearing commanded and obtained from Wade a certain respect and subordination which the big, hard man could not withhold. Wade still felt confident of his power to crush, yet he felt that he was crushing something finer and better than himself.

"You've been to that auction?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Didn't meet any old friends there?" Wade's grin was like flint.

"No. But I saw some brand new enemies."

"You thought I was bluffling, huh?" Wade sneered.

Corvan searched the other's face gravely. He nodded.

"Look here." Wade drew from his inner breast pocket two documents, each of which contained several pages of typewritten script. "They're affidavits," he said. "Welsh and Noylan brought them down. We can get more, too. Enough to put the district attorney on the job. When I use these, you're pinched, see?"

Corvan nodded wearily.

"Yes," he said. "You win, Wade."

Wade grinned.

"You mean you'll take Queritt's check?"

"I mean that you've got me. You've beaten me. The only thing I can fight you with would be polluted by your touch and it could never save me from myself. So I'm going to move out of here. I'm going to run up to Brookhampton now and get that check. Then I'll take the eight-ten to the city and you can meet me there. You can take the money—"

"We'll split," smiled Wade, reassuringly.

Corvan lashed him with a voice that throbbed with passion.

"I said, you will take the money!" he cried; and paused to control himself again. . . . "You will take the money—and we're through! Do you understand?"

Wade looked at him curiously.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess I understand."

"And one more thing!" Corvan turned at the doorsill to pursue his thought. "When I go to Brookhampton

to-night, *I disappear!* Do you understand that? I vanish from this place as completely as if I had never existed. No one in the world must know where I have gone, *or what I have been in the past!* Is that clear? Is that firmly impressed on your mind?" He advanced a few steps, coming close to loom over the seated man. "Because, if it is not—if ever a word leaks out that will betray to one person what vile substance she has touched, I'm going to find you out, Wade, wherever you may be, and I'm going to kill you! Do you understand that?"

And again Wade said, "Yeah, I guess I understand."

"Then meet me up at Gasmeier's to-morrow noon, and we'll see this last graft through."

As he left the house and slammed the door behind him, he felt with a pang of pain and yearning and regret that no door could now shut out from his mind the bitter memory of how sweet life might have been.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Mr. Queritt sat in a comfortable sitting room at the Sacket House. The Sacket House dated from a day when inns were built for the traveler's comfort rather than the proprietor's glory, and Mr. Queritt's sitting room afforded him a large writing table and an open fireplace. With a canny regard for his money's worth, Mr. Queritt had seated himself so that he benefited from both these comforts. As a result of his regard for the latter, the room, in spite of the wide-open French windows, might have been, for a younger man, uncomfortably hot. For Mr. Queritt it was snug, and, as he considered such matters, "homey."

Corvan, who had motored from the village faster than the wind, and then walked five miles on the quarter-mile pavement that Brookhampton's main street boasted, found the atmosphere of Mr. Queritt's sitting room intolerable. Immediately he entered, he strode to the open windows, thus putting the large writing table between himself and the bright little man who, having greeted him, sank back into the chair behind that table. Yet even in the open windows, with the ceaselessly moving trees outside seeming so near his touch, and beyond them a sky full of stars, Corvan felt the close atmos-

phere of the room. It seemed to suffocate him. It pressed upon his forehead, and his chest felt near to bursting. As he spoke to Queritt he found that his forehead was wet with perspiration. The palms of his hands were damp.

"It's terribly hot in here," he said.

"That's the fire," smiled Queritt. His bright eyes were flitting over his visitor with an omnivorous curiosity. "I like it because it's homey. You'll find it cooler after you've sat awhile." He indicated a comfortable chair.

"No, thank you," said Corvan. "I won't sit down. I haven't much time." There was flitting through his mind the thought of that homeward ride back to the city. "Homeward!" The word brought a fleet smile to his lips. Queritt answered it with a disquieting effect of complete understanding.

"I hope you've come to accept the offer I have made you," he said. "It's still open, you know."

Corvan looked across the table at the little man with something akin to horror. Yet it was more complicated than that. Relief, too, was in his mind, as Queritt thus smoothed the pathway for him; but the peculiar sensation of repugnance was there as well. He could take that check more easily, he knew, if he had had to overcome reluctance in the little man. There was something too easy about this. Something which, in the light of new experience, roused an impulse in Corvan to make a clean breast of his position and refuse the check point-blank. He might have done it, but he remembered

Margaret. He was playing a defensive game now. He was protecting her. To preserve her confidence in a man who would now cease to exist for her, he must betray this man's confidence in him. After that he need only forget. This little man's broken faith would be a small matter in the history he would have to put out of his mind. And he had a life time to spend in doing it.

He smiled in the dim light of his corner, and hoped that the light was dim enough to prevent Queritt examining too closely that smile. For he smiled with an effort.

"Yes," he said, "I have come to accept that offer. Circumstances have arisen that make it—"

But Queritt, opening a drawer in the table, interrupted him.

"Don't," he said. "You needn't explain."

He placed a check upon the table. An eminently businesslike check, with rubber stampings on it, and indelible, perforated figures.

"You see it is certified," smiled Queritt. "A certified check for ninety thousand dollars. I have had it for you a long time now." He sat back in his chair and smiled with his head on one side as Corvan picked up the slip of paper and examined it.

Corvan gazed at the numbers stamped upon the check with all the inward misgivings that might have afflicted Belshazzar as he looked upon the cabalistic figures on the palace wall. Certainly Corvan's kingdom was divided. Corvan looked across at Queritt, and the fan-

tastic allegory persisted in his mind. He played with it whimsically, ironically, in the fleeting seconds that ticked away as he stood there with the slip of paper in his hand. Queritt was gazing at him with a peculiar omniscience in his eyes. That is how Daniel would have gazed at the king in Babylon.

"I can't understand why you trust me in this way," said Corvan, slowly. "You are a business man. I don't see why you trust me."

"I'm not trusting you," said Queritt. "I mean, I'm not a business man. I outgrew that years ago. You think it is childish for a man to trust another like this. You are wrong. It is the business attitude that is childish. I'm old enough now to know that money is not important. And I'm rich enough to confess that knowledge and act upon it.

"I came down here to make sure that I was not throwing this money into the hands of a swindler, because a swindler is even less important than money. I arrived in time to see you in a light that showed me a spirit that is more important than anything else in the world. A study in comparative importance, that's all it is. When you get as old as I am, you'll find that a man with the kind of spirit you possess is worth investing in."

Corvan stood and stared down upon the little man with a despair in his heart that forbade speech. The magnitude of the thing that had befallen him beat upon his brain. By that gradually upbuilding sequence of events that had followed the fit of an idiot boy, he had been transformed into a man who, in the estimation of

a business man, was more important than money! And the last action he was to play in that brave part was the confidence game supreme. The confidence game which leads the victim beyond all business instinct. The confidence game which is wrought of the inspiration of implicit confidence. The most dastardly game in the world. And after it was played he wouldn't be more important than money any more.

"Don't make your standards too high," he said at last. "It doesn't pay."

Queritt smiled brightly.

"That's another thing you learn when you get older," he said. "By standards, you mean ideals, and the man of your age is afraid of ideals because they interfere with business. But if he is wise he doesn't lose them. He just lays them aside until he has made enough money to be able to afford them. The result is that only boys and very rich old men, who haven't forgotten where they laid them, really try to live up to their ideals. I happen to be in a position to place them as high as I like. I'm betting ninety thousand dollars on one of them now. Ever since that day of the wreck, you've been an ideal to me. The kind of man I like to think my son would have been if I'd had one."

Corvan frowned, clenching his hands.

"Suppose you lose?" He forced out the words very gruffly.

"I won't," chirped Queritt. "I'll tell you why I won't." He leaned over his table and smiled into the other's face. "I know that you've got a good reason for taking that

check," he said, and his voice was very kind. "I don't know what the reason is, but I know it's good. I know, too, that if things were as you believe them to be, the result would be more terrible than, for your sake, I like to think of. But as it is, I know I won't lose my bet, because Charlie Broderick recovered from the wound he received at Welsh's place, and in a few weeks will be as well a man as you are!"

Corvan cried out, a sharp, unintelligible cry, and, pathetic with his fear to believe this news, he stepped forward, towering over the little man.

"How," he cried hoarsely, "how do you know that? How? Tell me how!"

Queritt arose and placed a hand on Corvan's shoulder. He spoke eagerly and quickly into Corvan's ear, as a father might have brought to a loved son the news that would make him free.

"A man named Brower," he cried. "Brower. I bought him for seven hundred dollars. For that price he gave me enough information, and I called up old John Broderick and got the truth from his own lips. As for the shooting, old Broderick will spend his last cent and use his utmost power to hush it up. Wade was bluffing!"

"Bluffing!" Corvan cried out in great anger. He swung toward the door with a crazy impulse to dash immediately at Wade's thick throat. Queritt grasped him by his right arm and shoulder.

"You see?" he cried.

And suddenly Corvan collapsed. He sank into Queritt's chair by the fireplace and began to laugh.

"My lord," he laughed. "He was bluffing! He bluffed me!" But his laugh was not nice to hear.

Queritt stood and played with his watch chain. It was a heavy, gold watch chain, and the dim light caught the links of it, bringing forth a glitter like that of bright jewels. He swung the watch about in his hand and watched Corvan until the young man was silent, and sat looking into the fire with his fine face serene. This Corvan was the man who had at last freed himself from the cloak which life had thrown across his shoulders, and had now in its fateful way stripped off again. But it is an astounding thing for a man to find himself at Corvan's age a different being than he had ever hoped to be, and Corvan sat quite silent, contemplating his situation. It did not seem dramatic, now. That ponderous burden which for weeks he had endeavored with vast effort to throw off left him, as it now fell forever from his shoulders, a sense of ineffable lightness and serenity. He sprang suddenly to his feet.

"There is only one thing more to do!" he cried, and fixed Queritt with a glance that had something of radiance in it. He saw the question in the old man's eyes and answered it. "Make a clean breast of the business to Margaret Fiske!"

Queritt nodded brightly. He knew Corvan and understood him with a peculiar intimacy—an insight that was as uncanny as it was true.

"And Wade?"

"It will be fine!" laughed Corvan. He was thinking of what he would say to Wade.

CHAPTER XL

CORVAN SEES IT THROUGH

Corvan found Wade in the familiar living room of the Humphrey manor, and he felt an indescribable glow of satisfaction as he entered. This room, he knew, was his home.

Wade, who had sat back in that chair, sucking at that cigar, for an hour; who had been silently reiterating to himself, ever since Corvan left him, the rich victory he had achieved, looked up with immeasurable astonishment as he saw Corvan enter. He looked up and swore. Then he arose.

"Here's the check," said Corvan, smiling. And Wade sensed the satisfaction in that smile. His face fell.

"What did you come back for?" he barked sharply.

"To give you the check."

Wade took the slip of paper from Corvan's hand.

"Cash it yourself," grinned Corvan.

The swindler turned the check over, examined it with ridiculous care. He was puzzled. The check was indorsed by Corvan, and properly made out in all essentials.

"What did you come back for?" he asked again.

"Because now that I've turned that over to you," said

Corvan, "I'm through. I'm a free man, now, and I think I'll settle down. This place suits me."

Wade laughed uneasily.

"You're free, 'til Queritt gets wise," he sneered.

"I should have mentioned that," smiled Corvan. "He's wise. The man who cashes that check will be arrested at the bank."

Wade started back like a wild beast at the snap of the trap. He snarled. It is not a figure of speech: he snarled, like an animal.

"I'm wise, too," said Corvan. "About Broderick, you know. Queritt's been speaking with him on the phone. . . . Where are you going?"

Wade had stood, fixed with fury, glaring at him; then he had swung on his heel and made for the stairway.

"Pack my bag," he barked. He had seen his betrayal bright in Corvan's eyes, and he accepted defeat not gracefully, but as a thing inevitable. He plunged up the stairs and did not show Corvan his face as he departed.

Corvan stood again beside the mantelpiece and looked over the big room as he had looked it over that day of his arrival, with Maddox slouching against the table near the window. He wondered hazily where Maddox might be now. He must keep in touch with Maddox, he reflected; for Maddox, he knew, was full of promise. He could count upon his friendship to keep Maddox straight, thought Corvan. And as he thought these things a whistle blew far off. The whistle of a train departing for the city. The train which was to have

taken him away from here forever. That brought his thoughts back to Wade.

"Poor devil!" he said to himself. And the poor devil came down the stairs to stand under the archway with a suit case in his hand and grin at him like a mask. It was a mask, that grin: a mask that hid murderous thoughts which were futile.

"So long, Dan," grinned Wade.

"So long."

And that was all. The door closed behind Wade, taking the mask away; leaving the grudge faintly, fatuously, behind.

"Poor devil!" reflected Corvan.

He stepped over to the couch and sank into its embrace. He mused upon the faintness of the personality which had been the hard, domineering Wade. The man had hardly left a spark behind him. He had appeared in the archway and disappeared with no more impress upon Corvan's spirit than if he had been a servant going out for the mail. It was amazing that Wade should have so completely lost his power in Corvan's life. It was amazing, felt Corvan, that all the past should so magically have slipped from him. He was like a newborn man in a new-made world. Just himself and Margaret, there would be. And Maddox. He must not lose sight of Maddox.

He could not know that even as he thought this thought, the object of his resolution was sitting with Sally Martin on a veranda walled with the starlit sky, and making resolutions of his own that did not include

Corvan at all. Maddox was going to marry Sally Martin, and he and Bud would go into business together. They would run a store, and be very comfortable.

"You can manage the business and Bud can run 'round in the Ford," explained Sally.

"Sure," said Maddox spaciously. He would never find out that in whatever business he entered with whomsoever might be his partner, it was Sally who would manage it, as she would manage him for the rest of his happy, unquestioning acceptance of life.

Corvan did not know these things, however, and he included Maddox in his thought for the future, because he desired to see Maddox settled in the safe keeping of just such a career as Sally had long since arranged for him. And beyond Maddox there was Margaret.

He frowned with the remembrance of the decision he had made. He would have to make a clean breast of all this affair to Margaret. He smiled with the remembrance of Margaret herself. She would understand. She would trust him. There was a pounding at the door. He passed Mrs. Bland in the hallway and opened the door himself. Margaret stood there. She was radiant, she was happy, he could see, beyond measure of happiness.

"Come outside," she whispered. "There is some one out here."

He felt her excitement, and followed her to the car which stood in the drive below his steps.

"What is it, Margaret?" he asked.

"We have been to the station," she replied. But his

eyes had left her face to dwell upon the form of a boy who had alighted from the car. He was a boy of sixteen or seventeen. A well-built, upright boy, and his face bore a light and fair happiness in it which was the radiance of a youth that had not known happiness before. There flitted across Corvan's mind a picture of that face as he had seen it once before; and as he had seen it, a grotesque and idiotic countenance, in the arms of Margaret Fiske. And now a soul had entered that countenance. A light was in its eyes. And that light regarded him with recognition.

"It is you!" cried Harold Trench, and he stepped forward with a glad, eager gesture that knew nothing of how these things are conventionally done.

"I received the wire this afternoon," Margaret was explaining. "I looked all over for you to come with us to the station."

"I'm glad. I'm glad, old man!" Corvan's eyes were glued to the adoring gaze of the youngster. He wrung the boy's hand and pounded him again and again upon the shoulder. It was all he could say.

"But I suppose you heard about it," cried Margaret.

"No! No!" said Corvan. Then, suddenly, "Where are you going now?"

"To take him home, of course. His nurse is in the car, and we're going to pick up Mr. Humphrey on the way."

"Of course." He looked from one to the other of them; to the nurse who hovered, waiting, beside the driver of the car. "Of course, they will be waiting. But, Margaret! There is something I must say to you. Let

them go on, and we will follow." He smiled quickly and impulsively at the boy, whose eyes eagerly answered him.

"Yes!" cried the girl. Corvan sensed that in some mystic way his request had made her happy. She turned to place Harold in the car again, to instruct the driver, to whisper with the nurse. The motor thrummed and the car was gone. For the first time Corvan was conscious of the wealth of stars that filled the sky above them; and the sky was cut into fantastic fragments by the leafy outlines of the trees.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

He looked at her face. It was fresh and bright. She was apparently moved to the verge of ecstasy by the appearance of the boy on his return. And Corvan smiled; he smiled with a freedom and a touch of pure boyhood that had not been given him for many years.

"Even the stars are new!" he cried, giving way to an absurd impulse. "Margaret, I have to tell you all about the past. And yet that past is dead so many years and years that I can hardly speak of it. But when it died, I said to myself, 'Thank God, the past is dead. And now I am a new man! I am more important than money! I can begin to live all over again!'" He stopped abruptly and laughed at her astonishment; then he kissed her. "You understand that, do you?"

Very gravely she said, "Yes, I understand." And it brought him suddenly, into instant sanity. She had said it so gravely, with so much conviction. It reminded him of the amazing omniscience which Queritt had shown.

"Ah, but you don't," he murmured. "You don't. For I'm going to tell you about that past, Margaret, and it is black and ugly. . . ." He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked closely into her eyes. "Until to-night, at seven-thirty o'clock, I was a swindler, Margaret. I was one of the best confidence men in America."

She smiled quickly.

"You mean until the day of the wreck," she said.

He drew back from her, opening his eyes wide. He was astonished, as a boy is astonished, at the revelation of a public knowledge of a sin thought hidden.

"You know?" he cried.

"Oh, my dear!" She drew close to him and placed an arm upon his shoulder. Then suddenly, magically, everything vanished out of his world, every problem from his mind, except that he and Margaret were alone on the earth, that she was close to him, and that they were happy, and understood. He embraced her, and well-nigh suffocated her against his breast. But a sound came up to his ears as he held her there, and the beauty of the world was made more beautiful by the sound of her chiding voice.

"Do you think that Maddox told me nothing, or old Grimshaw, or dear, inquisitive Mr. Queritt? Do you think that your poor hunted eyes didn't set me thinking?" But he heard no more, for she could speak no more. He held her so close, so much in fear of losing her, so eager that this moment should not end.

Yet it did end, and with its ending they walked through the violet night together. They walked through the

scented roads to rejoin the boy who had first brought them together, and as they walked they planned a future which would not take them apart in all the years to come. They dealt with such happy, confident details as Corvan's life had not included before this. They played upon a note of wholesome, foolish optimism, as before this he had not been wise enough to tolerate. He who had always thought money a thing of little importance, discovered in that walk, that the things more important than money are things he had never dreamed to be of any importance whatever.

(2)

THE END

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